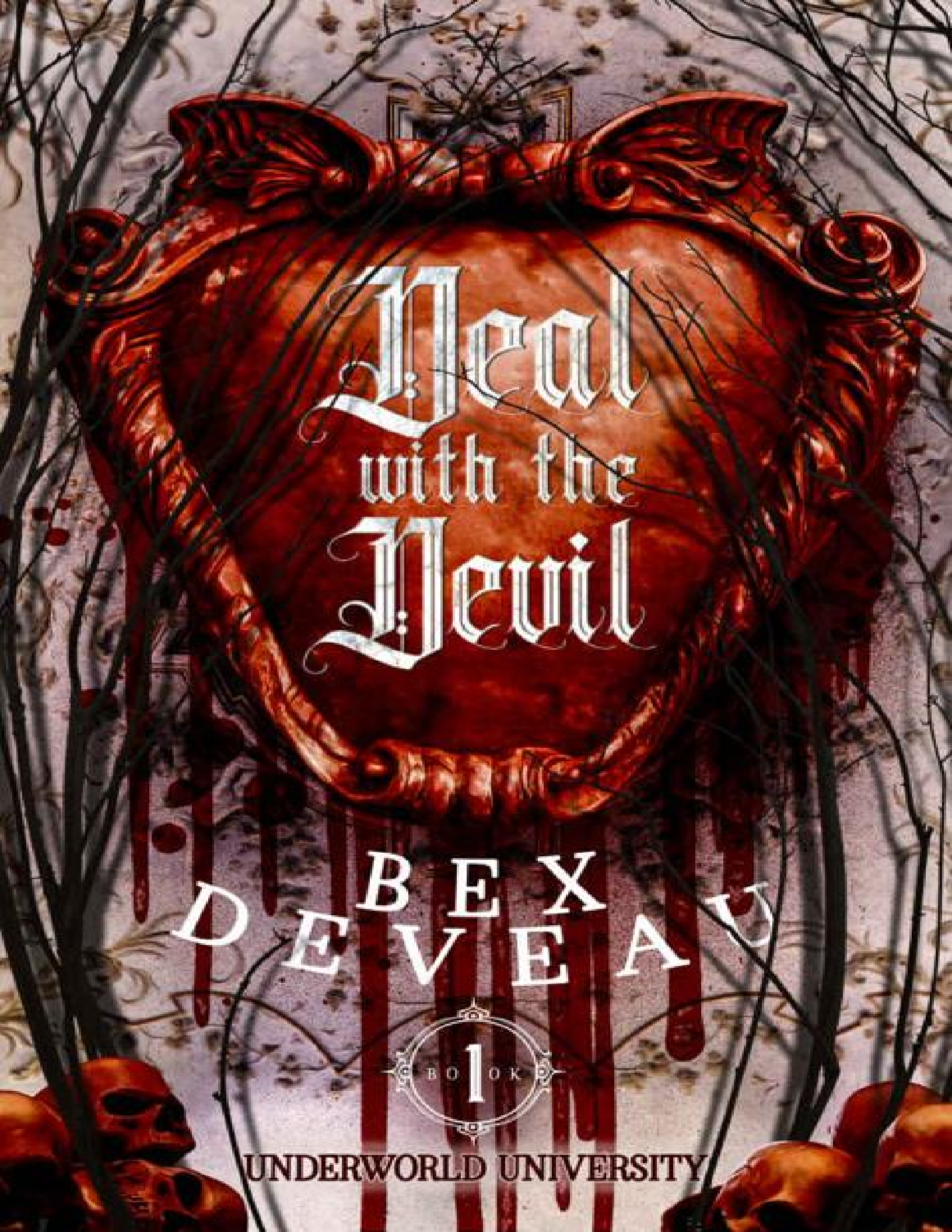




Deal with the Devil

DEBEX
EVEAU



UNDERWORLD UNIVERSITY

DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

UNDERWORLD UNIVERSITY #1

BEX DEVEAU

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Deal with the Devil

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Deal with the Devil and the subsequent novels in the Underworld Academy series contain themes that heavily rely on Christian-centric rhetoric (demons, angels, the concepts of Hell and Heaven as potential afterlives, penance, etc.) that do not reflect the author's beliefs. This story is a work of fiction and none of the depictions of religion or religious practices within its pages or associated media should be taken as fact.

Though this story is told from the POV of an American, I am Canadian and *do* use the British/Canadian spellings of words. I promise they aren't misspelled.

TRIGGER WARNINGS

Death, violence, head trauma, graphic sexual content, church settings/priests, mild gore, swearing, mutilation of a corpse (historical mentions), monsterfucking, catholicism, Heaven/Hell mentions, biblical angels, demons, sex work, ableism/ableist language, eating disorder-like behaviours, polyamorous relationships, choking, parental death (historical), guns, knives, bugs, severe eye trauma.

Deal
with the
Devil

BEX DEVEAU

For my Book Whores, without you all there would be no book.

OLIVIA

ONE

The distant wail of sirens had my heart hammering against my ribs. They were still far off—twenty blocks by my guess—and I was damn good at guessing how long I had before the pigs got the drop on me. But, I was still far enough from the drop site for it to make me nervous. The duffle bag slung over my shoulder suddenly felt twice as heavy as it was a second ago.

If I was caught with this package I was looking at ten years. Minimum. And that's if I sucked off the judge. Not that it would do me much good, money always talked more than sex in this town. Luckily for me, *mia famiglia* had more than enough money to grease the pockets of dirty cops for an early release.

It would be a waste to break my perfect record though.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, pulling my attention away from the noise. I freed it from my jeans, rolling my eyes at my brother's contact flashing along with his text on the screen.

WES

Clear?

I BREATHED A LAUGH, tapping out my reply while I waited for the light to change at the crosswalk.

I WASN'T in the shittiest part of town, not by a long shot, but it sure as fuck wasn't the suburbs. Stickers and graffiti covered the telephone poles and newspaper stands. Corrugated metal had been rolled down to cover the shop fronts on both sides of the street. The sidewalks were crumbling and coated in a thin layer of cigarette butts and gum. Litter and decaying leaves blocked the gutters, making the water from the morning's rain pool unevenly in the street.

I kept a casual pace as the sirens drew nearer, reminding myself that if they were coming to collect me there is no way they'd have their wailers on. Why give me a head start? No, all that racket was for skipping red lights and moving pedestrians.

Stop being a little bitch, Liv. You're acting like a greenie.

The job was easy. Get in. Drop the bag to Ricky. Get out with some quick cash in my pocket so I wouldn't have to ask Penny to cover my tab at the Spade for the fifth time this month. My student loans barely covered tuition and the shitty dorm I shared with Darla—a giant of a woman on a wrestling scholarship—which meant I had less and less pocket money for nights out.

Like most kids with parents who owned family businesses, I had a part-time job available to me. That part-time job just consisted of running forged documents and scrubbed weapons more often than it meant bussing tables. So, instead of studying for my midterms, I was braving the chilly streets with a sack full of counterfeit cash.

The *famiglia's* money always came with a price.

Officially, the family business was real estate. Uncle Gio—Giovanni to everyone except for his mother, Wes, and I—owned a fuck ton of property all around Jersey. But off the books? Drugs and arms trade were the name of the game.

Counterfeiting was a new, very lucrative element of the business.

One that needed a runner they could trust—and wouldn't get caught.

I crossed the street and turned the corner, the little shitbox diner Ricky had picked for the drop zone coming into view with its ominous neon sign. Half the letters were burned out and the whole thing flickered like something out of a horror movie. It was creepy as fuck, and not only because it read '*die*' instead of '*diner*'.

A few recessions ago the place may have been pegged as retro, might have even been a hotspot for influencers looking for a bit of vintage whimsy for their Instagram feeds. But now? It was all peeling pink paint and cracked leather seats that had long since yellowed.

I didn't waste time as I reached the building, pulling the door open with the chime of the bell that sounded as defeated as Maureen, the ancient waitress, looked.

She turned her sagging face, painted with bright blue eyeshadow and coral blush, to me and smiled. Her uniform was pristine—the only thing in the place that looked like it had seen soap in the last decade—and she wore her silver and copper hair curled like she'd been to a salon to set it in rollers, the same as it'd been since I was in elementary school.

"Good evenin' Miss Olivia!" she called with a voice like gravel from behind the teal and chrome counter. Maureen had been a two-pack-a-day smoker since '86. It was a miracle she had any voice left.

The Sunshine Diner was owned by the *famiglia*—more accurately, by Gio—and the staff were either discreet, like old Maureen, or members of the gang themselves. Pretty much the only customers that came through here were affiliated in some way, or they didn't give a fuck about us doing business inside.

I spotted Ricky right away, sipping a chocolate milkshake—complete with cherry—as he reclined in a booth away from the window. The stupid asshole was wearing an immaculately tailored suit in black, a golden watch that probably cost more than my car glinting on his wrist. So much for a discreet drop. Ricky looked about as natural in a place like this as Uncle Enzo's toupee.

He grinned as I approached and despite my lingering irritation, I returned it.

Riccardo—Ricky to everyone who mattered—was only three years my senior, the same age as my brother Wes. I practically grew up in their pockets, the three of us an unstoppable force.

On his own, he was a bit of an idiot—but despite his womanizing and gambling, Ricky was a brother to me. Even if he was actually my cousin. You know, the mangey kind that never seemed to be where they were supposed to be. The type that Grandma didn't have pictures of on the wall and whose name was usually followed by a good-natured eye roll.

It really added to his charm in a demented sort of way.

I threw myself down onto the seat opposite him with the squeak of leather.

“Cugina.” He grinned, sliding a half-eaten basket of french fries my way. “Hope you don’t mind. I was starving.”

“Honestly, I’m impressed that you saved me some.” I dropped the duffle onto the floor between us, using my sneakered foot to shove it over. With a quick wipe of my fingers on a napkin from the metal dispenser, I snatched up a fry, swiping it through the ketchup and popping it into my mouth. “What’s the word?”

“Same old, same old.” He leaned forward, setting his drink on the table and rubbing a hand over the back of his tattooed neck, hidden by the stiff collar of his starched shirt. It didn’t do for made men to look like common thugs, but Ricky preferred a t-shirt and jeans over the outlandish suits that Gio required of his inner circle.

“What is it?” I asked, eyes narrowing. Ricky never liked to give bad news but his poker face had the subtlety of a Fourth of July fireworks display.

“Ah, well... Maybe it’s nothing Liv.”

“If it was nothing you wouldn’t look like you just dumped one of Nonna’s salt bowls.”

He laughed without humour. “Fine! But if I tell you, you’re going to tell Wes and then Wes is going to crawl up my ass and die there until we get eyes on him again.”

“*Again?*” I said, trying and failing to ignore the way a chill ran down my spine.

There was only one ‘*him*’ that would rile up Ricky *and* my brother. And that slimy Irish cunt was supposed to be well and done sniffing around me and my family.

“The boys saw Liam on the East Side.”

The fry made a valiant effort to resurface as panic soured my stomach. If Liam was back in town there was only one reason why. He was looking for Kallum—*again*. Pity, neither he or the FBI agent they’d been colluding with would ever find him.

Kallum was currently enjoying a very chilly afterlife in a deep freeze. Originally we—Ricky, Wes, and I—had stashed him there as a temporary measure. It was impossible to dig a hole into the frozen New Jersey ground while snow was still covering it.

Note to self: no more winter murders.

By the time summer comes around again you totally forget about the body until you're already in English Lit 102 and it's shockingly difficult to make time for shallow graves when you are taking a full course load and have a part-time job.

My eyes flicked to the door as though I expected the Irish asshole to appear like the grim reaper.

"You don't think—?"

"Naw, nobody knows except me an' Wes. And your brother is no rat. Especially not where you're concerned."

"What if—"

"Liv, listen to me. *It's not possible.*" He patted my arm dismissively like he used to when we were kids. "We took care of it."

I felt myself nodding before I consciously decided to. "I'm going to the Spade."

"Watch your back Liv. You have Dolly with you?"

I rolled my eyes, lifting the loose t-shirt I wore just enough for the silver butt of my gun—Dolly, named for the famously tiny country star—to be visible over the hem of my jeans.

"Good girl," he growled. "Don't worry, I'll take care of Liam before he causes any trouble."

"I trust you, Ricky."

The gap in his teeth winked at me as he grinned. "Aw, shucks! Liv don't go soft on me now."

"You wish. I'll see you tomorrow for church?"

"I'll be there bright and early. Gio asked me to pick up Nonna for service since you and Wes moved back into the dorms and are too busy for the old lady now." His gaze was steady as he lifted his straw to his lips for a long drink.

I opened my mouth to argue, irritation drawing my eyebrows together. It wasn't like I could live in the shadow of Gio's catholic guilt forever. Eventually, a girl needed to move on with her life. Ideally in a way that got both me and Wes out of the mafia.

"Don't worry, cugina. I'll see you at dinner," Ricky said smoothly, nudging my foot with his under the table. "And don't worry about Liam, I'll make sure he's back where he belongs in no time."

I nodded tightly. Liam was a problem that I didn't have time for right now, not with my classwork piling up. I needed to focus on my grades. Not potentially vengeful brothers of murder victims—or, as Liam knew Kallum as, *missing persons*.

THE SPADE WAS a dive on the outskirts of Little Italy. Though it wasn't actually affiliated with the crime families in the city, there was no shortage of *famiglia* that spent time within its walls. The rules here were simple; behave like law-abiding citizens or piss off. It was a nice break from the constant alphaholes that flooded Sorrentino's, the cafe and bar used as our clubhouse.

Too many losers looking to pick a fight with the boss's kids. It was better for both Wes and I to only show up when we had to for jobs. Or when one of the aforementioned alphaholes needed to be reminded who the fuck they were gossiping about. Or if you needed a half-decent plate of bolognese.

Wes and Penny were tucked into a corner by the pool tables. I wove my way through the cramped booths and slot machines to meet them, knocking my knuckles against my brother's offered fist.

Penny tossed her arms around my neck and my nose wrinkled at the smell of liquor coming off her in waves. I wrapped an arm around her waist to steady her so she didn't push me clean off my feet, offering a half-hearted grin.

It would've been funny if I wasn't so tense from my cousin's news.

"Uh, hi?"

"Liv!" she trilled, her blue eyes wide as saucers as she drew my name out into a song. "You'll never believe it!"

Penny's white blouse was rucked up, half out of the sensible high-waisted pencil skirt she'd likely worn to her cushy downtown office. It was nearly the end of the fiscal year, which meant Saturday overtime for *everyone*. Even receptionists.

"She's been like this since I got here," grumbled Wes with his arms crossed over his chest, the leather of his jacket creaking. My older brother

was tall, with broad shoulders and thick, muscular arms from years of working the docks for Uncle Alphonso during evenings and weekends.

But what my brother had in height and muscle, he lacked in people skills. He always said they were just too... peopley for him. It's what made him the perfect deckhand. He didn't need a bunch of co-workers around to gab with while he did his job, and it was always easier to smuggle when there were less witnesses.

Wes took after our mom—fair skin, steel grey eyes and a strong jawline.

I was all dad, olive skin that tanned easily in the summer, boring brown eyes and the Ricci nose—straight but slightly upturned.

When we were young, it really pissed me off that Wes had scored the Wattpad fantasy eye colour, especially given that he didn't care about it. Now, I reasoned that at least I got the eyelashes out of the two of us. And tanning wasn't so bad either—I'd watched as Wes suffered through many a sunburn. They seemed like a bad time.

I sighed and patted Penny's back lightly. "What are you drinking to forget tonight?"

She hiccupped and leaned against me with even more of her body weight. For someone who could likely be zipped into a suitcase, Penny was heavy as hell.

"Don't be mad," the redhead whined.

"Not a great start, Pen," chuckled Wes, scrubbing a hand through his dark hair.

She jutted out her bottom lip into an exaggerated pout. "Well... Josh asked me again about going out with you."

I groaned. She'd been trying to set me up with her co-worker from her day job—an honest-to-god accounting firm—for weeks. So far I'd managed to dodge the idea, but based on Penny's state of inebriation I had a feeling like that ship had long sailed.

"Pen," I said firmly, gripping her by the shoulders. "I'm not ready to date anyone."

Not when my last boyfriend was waiting for us to dispose of his body and his crazy brother just materialised out of thin air. When Liam rubbed his two brain cells together and figured out that I killed Kallum—Well, he's not a smart guy. But he is one hell of a mean bastard.

“So fuck him once and then never call him again,” Penny whined. “Please, please, please? He’s my boss, Liv! And you’ve already blown him off twice!”

Wes snorted an extremely unhelpful laugh and I fixed a glare in his direction.

“Shouldn’t you be like telling her that there is no way your baby sister is going on a date with her boss?”

“You can handle yourself well enough.”

Penny gripped my face, pushing my cheeks together until all I could do was open and close my lips like a fish. “I’m begging you. If you don’t go I am so, *totally*, not getting that promotion and—”

I groaned and peeled her hands away. “Fine! One date! But you owe *me* big, Pen.”

She squealed excitedly, her copper hair swaying in its long ponytail as she wrapped her arms around me in another bone-crushing hug. “Yes! Okay, I told him your address, and he is picking you up from yours at seven next Friday—” she blanched slightly, covering her mouth with her fingers. “Oh, maybe I should have given him the dorm address instead...”

I burst out laughing. “You gave him *Gio’s* address?”

Wes whistled lowly. “I didn’t know you wanted the man killed, Pen. There are easier ways than forcing Liv into a fake date.”

“I—Oh no.” She groaned, rubbing her palms over her face and mussing her mauve lipstick.

“Oh, yes,” I replied with a feral glint in my eye. If he survived an encounter with my adoptive father, his associates, and my entire extended family, maybe this date wouldn’t be so bad after all. Though it was more likely that Nonna would force the sucker into a plate of food and ask him a hundred questions about his ‘*good, honest living*’. The old woman was enamoured—as much as a mafioso’s daughter could be—with white-collar work.

Maybe, if I was feeling kind, I’d tell him to meet me at whatever undoubtedly boring date location he’d picked out instead.

“How did the job go?” asked Wes, taking a long drink from his beer and meeting my eye pointedly.

I latched onto the change of subject like a lifeline.

“Same old, same old. You know Ricky.”

“He say anything interesting?”

I freed myself from Penny's grip, collecting her half-finished drink from the edge of the pool table and downing it so I didn't have to meet Wes's eye as I replied.

"Nope." I popped the 'p'. I hated lying to him. But Ricky was right. If Wes knew Liam was back in town he would be up both of our asses. And, *apparently*, I had a date to add to my never-ending list of responsibilities.

He grunted, tilting his head to the pool table with a raised brow. "Wanna play a game?"

"Yes!" cooed Penny, kicking off her heels. "Rack 'em, Liv."

I handed her the empty glass and collected the balls from the pockets. I'd tell Wes about Liam after my date. It was only fair to give Ricky at least that much time to get rid of him before I set my guard dog off.

But if Ricky couldn't deal with Liam? I might be opposed to winter murders, but the snow hadn't hit the ground yet. There was always time to drown another rat.

OLIVIA

Two

Sundays were an all-day affair for the Ricci family.

It started with church at eight, followed by family dinner at Gio and Nonna's. If you could call having over a hundred and fifty guests '*family dinner*'. College did not exempt Wes and me from the festivities, which meant I was sporting a wicked hangover as I pulled into the packed parking lot of St. Joseph's Cathedral.

One game of pool had quickly turned into five. Which meant at least ten rounds of drinks.

The sun was not my friend today.

I parked beside Gio's luxury sedan, watching the finely clothed parishioners make their way inside the church through the darkened lenses of my sunglasses.

My head was pounding as I cut the engine and leaned my forehead against the steering wheel, taking a deep breath.

I had complicated feelings about the church. Though, I guessed most of our family did. It wasn't like we spent our free time volunteering at the local soup kitchen—we were hardened criminals for fucksakes. We were more likely to be found extorting politicians and moving stolen merchandise than helping little old ladies cross the street or whatever bullshit I was supposed to do to earn myself a one-way ticket into Heaven.

But for me? It was something a little more. A girl could only pray for her parents to miraculously come back to life—with no answer—for so long. There's no way that wrapping their car around a telephone pole was '*God's plan*'.

I shook that depressing thought away, grabbing my delicate handbag from the passenger seat and hopping out of the car. My cousin Mattia opened the wooden door as I marched across the parking lot, taking the stairs two at a time in my red-bottom stilettos.

“Good morning, Olive,” Mattia said cheerfully, handing me a programme as I crossed the threshold into the old cathedral.

“Altar boy,” I teased, removing my sunglasses and ruffling the boy’s brunette curls fondly.

Mattia rolled his eyes, his cherub-like cheeks flushing. “I’m fifteen, not five.”

I shrugged my shoulders, looking the teenager up and down. Mattia hadn’t yet hit his growth spurt, leaving me towering over him as I sauntered past. “Still look like a kid to me.”

“Olive!” chastised Nonna, wagging a finger at me from where she stood in the lobby with Wes. “Leave the ragazzo, come and say hello to an old woman.”

An easy smile tugged at my mouth as I approached her, kissing both her cheeks before she wrapped me in a tight hug.

“Bellissima,” Nonna praised, holding me at arm’s length by my shoulders. For someone nearing seventy, she had one hell of a grip.

I turned my grin to Wes, dressed in a smart charcoal suit with a deep blue tie.

“Morning,” he greeted, worry lining his gaze.

“Is something wrong?” I asked as Nonna brushed imaginary lint from the front of my fitted dress.

“Your good-for-nothing cousin didn’t pick me up for Mass. I was nearly late,” she tutted.

That was... odd. Just last night Ricky told me he’d be picking her up.

An uncomfortable feeling prickled the back of my neck as I looked at my brother.

“He probably had a late night,” he said, taking Nonna’s arm and leading us deeper inside the cathedral. “Come on, we’ll be starting soon.”

It had been less than twenty-four hours since Ricky mentioned Liam. I turned that fact over in my head a few times while trailing after my family.

It was probably a coincidence.

“I’m sure he just overslept, Nonna. Who brought you to church?” I asked, pushing my apprehension into a box and locking it shut.

“Wesley, of course,” she said, the wrinkles around her eyes more prominent with her fond smile.

Wes patted her hand. “Anything for my favourite woman.”

I waved as I spotted Gio standing in a navy suit with a white button-up shirt as he chatted with the priest. He wore no tie, his gold chain glinting in the sunlight streaming through the stained glass windows. Gio grinned as he met my eyes but didn’t make a move to approach. We’d have plenty of time to socialise at the house later.

Plus, we’d already been texting this morning.

Nonna pulled out her Bible as we found our seats, perching in the same spot on the worn wooden pew we’d sat in every Sunday for the last ten years. Well, except for the time I had chicken pox.

Wes thumped down beside me, waving the programme in his hand. “We’re doing Eden.”

I laughed.

Eden wasn’t my favourite of the stories, but it was close. There was a lot to be said about living in paradise and finding yourself wanting more.

I reached over and plucked Nonna’s Bible from her hands, flipping her to the first passage we’d be reading. Her eyes weren’t what they used to be and the little page numbers frustrated her more than helped—though most of the font really was too small for her tired eyes. I’d have to remember to download a copy onto her tablet so she could change the size of the font as she pleased.

I tucked that little task away for after I’d eaten my weight in tiramisu tonight, offering the book to her.

She grabbed my forearm, scowling up at me. “Where is your bracelet, Olive?”

I hadn’t even noticed my wrist was bare, I sighed. “I had it on before I left, must’ve lost it.”

Nonna muttered a string of curses under her breath in Italian, digging around in her bag until she produced a beaded bracelet similar to the one I’d lost. “Someone is out to get you, mia nipote.”

It was something of a superstition, the Evil Eye a talisman against those who might otherwise seek you harm. The story went that you’d lose

the charm once it'd protected you. I'd gone through about one a week since we killed Kallum.

Wes slung an arm around the back of the pew, stretching out his long legs. "Hard to believe with that winning personality of hers."

Nonna cuffed him around the back of the head. "Basta!" she snapped, before sliding the elasticized band around my wrist, turning it so that the brilliant blue eye—nestled amongst an array of black beads—stood proudly at the centre.

"Grazie," I whispered as the organ kicked into song. I pressed a swift kiss to her cheek, turning my attention to the front of the room.

We went through the motions of the service, singing hymns, reciting prayers, and listening to the sermon. I was just starting to daydream about the focaccia waiting at Gio's when the priest lifted the prayer request box onto his podium.

"It's a little heavy today." He grinned out at the congregation. "You all need a little extra help this week, hm?"

There was a smattering of light laughter around the room as the old man lifted the lid of the carved wooden box. The colour drained from the priest's face as the box, balanced on the edge of the podium, tipped over. A large, round object rolled onto the floor, leaving a trail of smudgy copper in its wake.

Wes was up in an instant, covering Nonna's eyes.

But me? I was frozen in place. Gaping at the severed head of my favourite cousin, Riccardo—Ricky—Esposito.

THE WEEK PASSED by in a bit of a blur. Between classes, funeral preparations, and finally getting around to disposing with Kallum's body, I was exhausted.

Every pair of eyes in the tri-state area was looking for Liam, but he'd gone to ground. No one had seen him since Ricky's guys on Saturday.

It made me nervous.

It made me *furious*.

"There's no way he left, right?" I asked Wes as we sat at the kitchen island in our pyjamas, sipping on wine and picking at some bruschetta

Nonna had left for us before she headed into the family room to watch Jeopardy.

Kind of a pathetic Friday night, but we were grieving. And for me that meant carbs.

In a family like this tomorrow wasn't a given, but Ricky had always been such a fixture in my life—It was hard to believe he was gone.

"Doubtful." Wes shrugged, popping a crostini into his mouth.

"Are you talking about that dipshit O'Brian again?" Gio growled, pulling a wine glass from the cabinet. His hair was wet from the shower, pushed back to show off the grey threaded through the sides.

Wes grunted in response and I scoffed, filling Gio's waiting glass with a healthy portion of merlot.

He took a sip, humming in appreciation. "Grazie, mio cuore."

"I don't like waiting," I whined, slamming my hand against the island in frustration.

"We'll find him," Gio swore, nudging me with his shoulder. His brown eyes—a perfect match for mine—swung between us both before landing back on me. "How was class this week?"

I groaned, laying my head on the counter.

"Exhausting."

"Between funeral planning and midterms coming up—" Wes abruptly stopped speaking as my phone began to ring, the three of us stiffening.

I pulled the device from the pocket of my sweatpants, the tension leaving my body as Penny's contact photo—one of my favourites of us, from one of our many trips to the shore, drinks in our hands and faces stretched into winning smiles—stared up at me.

"Hey Pen," I greeted, smacking at Gio's hand as he grabbed the last of our snack.

"Heeeeeeeeeellllllo!" she sing-songed through the receiver. "Ready for your date?"

Fuck.

"Oh—Well Pen... With Ricky and everything I—"

Not that Penny knew what *'and everything'* I meant. Luckily, she wasn't listening as she gasped dramatically.

"It's in an hour! You can't cancel now! That would be so rude! Besides, maybe a night out is exactly what you need—"

"Pen—"

“No way! You *promised*, and I promise Josh is totally cool. Plus, you are probably in your pjs doing that depressing thing you do where you drown yourself in pasta. It’s a perfect distraction! And if you don’t go I’m so not getting that promotion and—”

“Ugh, fine,’ I hissed, avoiding the curious looks that Gio and Wes were shooting my way. I drained my glass for some liquid courage. “Only because he is your boss though. And I swear to god if he tries to take me to a club anywhere *near* the Shore you are a dead woman.”

“He doesn’t seem the type,” she mused. “I have a feeling you’ll be surprised by Josh. He’s spontaneous.”

“That’s just you upselling instead of saying he is a last-minute non-planner,” I snorted.

“Guilty!” she trilled. “Send me a pic of what you decide to wear, it’s been ages since I’ve seen you all sexy.”

“Fine. Love you, P.”

“Love you, O.”

I threw my phone onto the counter with a groan. “Which of you wants to go first? I only have an hour so we need to keep the lectures under five minutes each.”

Wes motioned for Gio to go ahead. The latter’s dark brows pulled together with worry. “It’s dangerous for you to go out alone.”

“I wouldn’t be alone, I’d be with Jason—err, I mean Josh.”

Wes collected our empty plate, bringing it to the sink to wash. “We could send her with a security detail.”

Gio hummed thoughtfully, running a finger down the scar on his cheek. “That would be okay.”

“No way!” I scowled at Wes’s back. Fucking traitor. “I’ll go armed. Besides, I don’t know where we are going so it can’t be an ambush. He doesn’t even really know who I am, it’s not like Penny would have introduced me as the Ricci heir.”

“Because you aren’t,” Wes glowered. “I am.”

It was times like these that I remembered Gio wasn’t just the Ricci family chocolate chip pancake king, or a giant gossip. There were a fair amount of people that would piss themselves under the scowl he levelled my way.

“Fine. At least two hidden weapons. With easy access.”

I threw my arms around my uncle's neck, giving him a squeeze. "Will do, Team Rocket."

He chuckled, returning the hug. "I need to get to a job. Wes, you'll see her off?"

Translation: Wes, you'll adequately scare my date so bad that he leaves without me.

"What are big brothers for?" grunted the gentle giant, drying our plate and setting it into the cabinet.

I scoffed, trying to dislodge myself from Gio's iron grip. "Let go, I need to get ready."

"Ah, but I hardly get any time with you kids now that you're back in school."

"Sad how we have to have our own lives, isn't it?" teased Wes.

Gio tutted, giving me a final squeeze before releasing me. "Ciao, kids. Don't stay out too late, Olive." He waved and grabbed his keys from the bowl near the back door, disappearing into the dark of the evening.

I headed upstairs, grabbing a quick shower and stuffing myself into a halfway presentable outfit; basic black jeans and a cropped, silken top that offered a look at the bottom of my ribs, and a holster hidden under my leather jacket. My makeup was minimal, focused on adding warmth to my olive skin and length to my lashes.

The doorbell hurried me along, the sound of masculine voices drifting up the stairs to where I was snapping a selfie of my outfit to send to Penny. She responded immediately.

PENNY

FIYAAAAAAA *flame emoji*

ROLLING MY EYES, I headed downstairs.

A sandy brunet stood nervously in the doorway while Wes loomed by the end of the stairs, a gun sticking out of the waistband of his sweatpants.

Josh was... handsome. Not like oh-my-god-my-panties-need-to-be-changed hot, but he was good looking enough that he'd definitely scratch the itch. After the week I'd had, a fling was *exactly* what the doctor ordered. His light brown hair was cropped, but long enough to curl around

his ears. Tan skin and big brown eyes were set against a nose a little too large for his face.

“Please tell me you’re Olivia.” He grinned, his bottom teeth a little crooked as I got closer.

As I reached the landing he straightened up, obviously trying to look taller.

Wes scoffed but I spoke before he could, crossing my arms as I reached the foyer. “I hope you weren’t planning on saying that to whatever girl came to the door first.”

A faint blush touched his cheeks. “No, of course not!” His eyes dipped to the gun at Wes’s hip before meeting my gaze nervously. “Are you ready?”

“Yes. And I hope your plan involves food, I’m starving.”

“Don’t let Nonna hear you say that,” muttered Wes. “Have her home by two.”

“Fuck off Wes! You aren’t my keeper.” I breezed past my brother, grabbing Josh’s hand and leading him down the porch steps with determined strides.

I’d all but been on lockdown since Ricky showed up dead so I wasn’t going to squander my freedom arguing with my brother. Sure, I got why Wes and Gio were a little jumpy, I was too. But I learned to fire a gun before I knew the names of all the states. I could take care of myself.

“I love you, O!” he called after me with a laugh, waving his gun like a maniac as he leaned out the door. “Home by two! Or else!”

“You’re an asshole!” I shouted over my shoulder.

Josh unlocked the car and opened my door for me, waiting as I climbed inside. Our bodies brushed as I slid into the vehicle. He smelled like fresh laundry and ink. Not off-putting, but without any of the danger I usually sought in a partner.

Which was probably why my last boyfriend ended up as pig food. Maybe a boring accountant would be the best thing for me. I smiled up at him, clicking my seat belt into place as he closed the door with a soft thud.

While Josh rounded the car, I surreptitiously ran a hand over where I’d strapped my gun. I was grieving and in need of a little distraction, not fucking stupid. Even without Gio’s insistence, I wouldn’t go anywhere without Dolly.

When the door closed behind Josh on the other side he seemed to relax considerably. “I take it that’s Wes?”

“The one and only.”

He grinned, turning the engine over. “Penny wasn’t joking when she said you were beautiful. And that he’s overprotective.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” I muttered, squeezing his denim-clad thigh.

Oh, holy fuck. It was solid muscle under there.

“So... Where are we going?”

He pressed his lips together, miming zipping them shut. “It’s a surprise. But not too far, if you’ll humour me. Do you like barbecue?”

“Yes?” It was more of a question than an answer.

“Good.” He caught my hand, twining our fingers on the armrest. “This’ll be fun.”

I DIDN’T HAVE high expectations that a twenty-seven-year-old accountant from Marca, Texas would have any idea where to bring me on a date. But damn, Josh was full of surprises. I’d never even heard of the bar—the Horseshu—before; it was on the edge of town tucked into the business park like it had been here so long that the industrial neighbourhood had grown around it.

We sat across from each other in a cramped booth eating some of the best damn cornbread I’d had in my life. A plate of smoked meats, fries, and about six types of barbecue sauce slowly disappeared the longer we talked.

“So then Warren—” Josh said excitedly, not missing a beat as he sipped his beer.

“That’s the eldest right?”

“Second eldest,” he corrected with a grin. “So he gets on top of the barn and my Ma’ is hollering for him to get the hell down—”

“Oh no!” I laughed. “How did he even get up there?”

Josh snorted. “Climbed out the window and then used the tree to get the rest of the way.”

I had to admit, I was a little impressed.

Most of the guys I'd dated were too full of themselves to bring me anywhere other than one of the upscale restaurants around the city. Or to a movie while trying to get their fingers up my skirt. It was the first time I'd been brought on a date where the immediate goal wasn't getting into my pants.

Josh was charming. He had five brothers—all of which seemed to be quite the daredevils, himself included. I liked that he was a family man, especially since after losing my parents Wes and I had become practically inseparable.

He was also smart enough to fill the space with conversation as my mind wandered. The handful of whiskey sours I'd consumed doing little to keep me from thinking about Ricky.

What the fuck happened to you?

I pretended to listen to Josh talk while I looked around, blinking back tears.

Our table hugged a worn dance floor filled with people line dancing to music provided by the live band. We'd watched them load in and set up while we ordered our food and since they'd started their set, the floor was packed.

"So then Ma' is on the ground, looking up at this kid and his bedsheet that he is *positive* is going to save his life—" The band kicked into a new song, a fast-paced, fiddle-heavy country song that I'd heard a few times before. "—Oh! I love this song, would you like to dance?"

He offered his hand and I looked at it dubiously, raising an eyebrow.

"I mean I can like... *dance*. I'm not sure about a Two-Step though."

"Come on, it's easy and I'll teach you."

I took his hand, allowing him to tow me onto the dance floor with a silent prayer of thanks that I'd thought to wear a practical pair of leather boots. My back met his front as he led me through the steps, and by the end of the song, he'd already moved away to follow the steps on his own. We moved seamlessly into the next dance, the gentle simmer of alcohol loosening the coil of tension that'd been living in my stomach all week.

After a few more songs Josh slid his hand around my waist, drawing me against him. "You sure can move, darlin'. Want another drink?"

"Yes, please." I was slightly out of breath, my clothes and hair sticking to my skin with a thin layer of sweat.

It felt so... normal. Like for five minutes I was able to put aside the grief and anxiety I'd been struggling with. Just a college kid out for a date with a guy. I supposed I kind of owed Penny a little credit for setting it up. Josh wasn't half the dud I thought he'd be.

On the way to the bar, the crowd separated us. A solid chest knocked into my body hard enough to make me stumble backwards.

"Hey!" I snapped, craning my neck to make eye contact with the clumsy stranger. Holy fuck, he was *tall*. "Watch where you're going!"

His eyebrows, white blond to match his hair, pulled together in a scowl. "Olivia, you need to go home."

I scoffed. "Like Hell I do! Do I know you?" I squinted up at his oddly familiar face, though I couldn't place where I'd seen him before. "You one of Gio's boys? I thought you fuckheads knew I didn't answer to you."

His fingers gripped my forearm hard enough to bruise, an electric sort of energy pulsing between us as he pulled me closer to his broad chest. His face was so close I could taste the words on his lips. "You're in danger. Go home."

I yanked my arm back, narrowing my eyes. "Fuck off, dude. Put your hands on me again and find out what'll happen."

To drive the point home I pulled the front of my jacket to the side, flashing him the butt of my gun.

There was no way Liam would have found me *here*. Besides, this was way too public for him to make a move. Regardless, I looked around, my hand passing over my gun. The familiar motion enough to calm the anxiety balling in my gut.

"Please, listen to me. It's not safe." He glanced over my shoulder, his icy blue eyes widening. "Go home, right *now*."

I turned my head, squinting at the crowd. "Is it Liam?"

"Fuck," the tall stranger muttered. "I can't—I shouldn't have—Olivia, *please*—go home."

When I turned back around, he was gone.

The music turned to a dull pound in the base of my skull, hardly more noticeable than white noise against my pounding heart. I turned again, looking for the tall stranger. It wasn't like he'd be difficult to see over the crowd; the guy had to be at least 6'7", he'd tower over most.

But, no matter which way I looked, he was gone.

I blinked. I couldn't be so drunk that I imagined it, could I?

“Hey, sorry, the bar was packed. We’re going to have to wait a bit,” Josh said smoothly, a hand snaking around my waist. “Who was that?”

“No idea,” I replied, unnerved. I shook my head, pushing the weird encounter from my mind and focusing back on my date, eyes hooding.

I wasn’t going to run out of here with my tail between my legs, but a girl could be persuaded to go with the right reward.

“Wanna get out of here?” I asked, welcoming the distraction that a bit of friction could bring.

He nodded quickly, leading me out the doors into the cool night air.

“Let me go grab the car.”

“No way,” I laughed, grabbing the front of his shirt and pulling him into the alley beside the bar. He smirked as I boxed him into the concrete wall, threading my hands into his hair.

“Making out in a dirty alley? Penny did say you were adventurous.”

There she goes with the up-selling again. I guessed ‘*adventurous*’ was code for ‘*lunatic adrenaline junkie*’.

I bit my tongue on how I didn’t think heavy petting in an alley counted as ‘adventure’ and brought my lips to his. I tasted the whiskey we’d sipped on all night as we traded frantic kisses—there would be time for sweetness later. Josh’s hands gripped my ass, pulling me tight against him so I could feel his growing erection through the fabric of our jeans. I ground my hips against his, biting down on his bottom lip. His soft moan stoking a fire in my core.

I pulled away to nibble on his ear, already soaked and breathless.

“Why don’t you come back to my place?” he murmured, brushing his lips down my throat.

“Sure,” I agreed easily, eager to see if he knew how to use the sizeable bulge pressing against my hip.

Apprehension pricked at my spine a second too late, the gravel of the alley shifting under a boot alerting me that we weren’t alone.

“Sorry to ruin your plans,” a familiar voice called down the alley, a crown of red hair illuminated by the streetlights above.

My head whipped around to the intruder, catching sight of a glint of silver—the end of a gun—before a shot broke the quiet of the night.

Fuck.

I didn’t even have time to reach for my weapon before I was on the ground. The rustle of white feathers—or maybe they were gold—swept

me up into a warm embrace.

The copper tang of blood was thick on my tongue, cloying in my nose as my heart futilely beat harder.

It was a fucking set up.

And I'd been too overconfident and drunk to see it.

"I'm so sorry," a masculine voice—*Josh?*—murmured.

I opened my mouth to respond. Desperate to clear the unshed tears from the dozens of brilliantly blue eyes—*decidedly not Josh*—that disrupted the planes of the man's face. The warmth of his skin leeches into mine, his hand firmly pressing against my wound.

The world went black before a sound could pass my lips.

OLIVIA

THREE

I jerked awake, my hand flying to the burn radiating through my chest. The pain receded almost immediately, leaving behind a hollow twinge as I blinked under the fluorescent lights.

“Oh good,” a cheerful voice cooed, making me jump. A woman swung around in a high-backed leather office chair to look down her upturned nose at me. “You certainly took your time.”

“What?” I croaked, my vocal cords not quite getting the memo that it was time to work.

One moment I was on a date with a charming accountant and the next—Wait, where the fuck am I? What the fuck happened?

I rose from the uncomfortable upholstered chair, stumbling as my knees buckled under my weight.

“You should sit down. It takes a few minutes for your fine motor skills to return.” The woman stood, rounding the desk on a pair of killer red-bottom stilettos.

I cleared my throat, licking my lips nervously as I slumped back into the seat. “Who are you?”

“Impertinent, but I’ll let it slide since you just *died*.” She perched herself on the edge of the ornate wooden desk, tapping her nameplate with a sharply manicured finger.

Headmistress Linda Pan.

She pressed a button on her desk and confetti fell from the plaster ceiling in a shower of red, black and silver, along with a banner that unfurled behind her. The banner, a black backdrop with red brush lettering

that glittered in the harsh overhead lights, read ‘*Welcome to Underworld University!*’.

I blinked at her stupidly.

This had to be a joke.

“Underworld...University?”

Headmistress Pan shifted some documents on her desk, collecting a thick folio of paperwork. Her blonde hair was pulled away from her face in a low bun, offering a view of her too-sharp jawline. “You and Saint are our late arrivals. You aren’t going to cry, are you honey? I’m a demoness, not a counsellor. Human grief is always so,” she paused thoughtfully, tapping at her crimson lips, “*messy.*”

I peeled my eyes away from the woman and her skin-tight pencil skirt to look around the room. It was set up similarly to the dean’s office at NYU, with some macabre touches sprinkled in like a gruesome game of I Spy. A heavy, dark wood desk sat at the centre of the office, slightly too large for the space. Filing cabinets and bookshelves lined the back wall, now obscured by the banner. And then there were the butterflies. Hundreds of them in every shape and colour pinned in shadow boxes along the walls beside what I could only assume were meant to be motivational posters. Though who they were meant to motivate I wasn’t sure.

If they are bad, be worse.

Success is in the eye of thieves, liars, and cheats.

Passion is something you can exploit.

Opportunity is in the eye of the desperate.

When my eyes found the headmistress again, her plush lips were set in a warm smile. Somehow, it felt anything but friendly. Something about her beauty was a little too perfect to be human.

“What the fuck is going on? Where’s Josh?” I asked, finding my voice at last.

“You died.”

“I—*What?!*” I shrieked.

Dead? I couldn’t be *dead*.

My heart was pounding in my chest so hard it was painful.

A very good case for me being alive—I mean, other than the simple fact that I was sitting right here, having this insane conversation.

Clearly, Josh must’ve drugged me. I knew he seemed too good to be true with that whole ‘*country boy in the big city*’ bullshit he was putting

on.

“That isn’t funny.”

“Do I look like I’m joking?” she asked, bouncing her foot in irritation.

“Well, you fucking must be since I’m sitting right here talking to you.”

I blinked and the mild, if not irritated, woman in front of me disappeared, leaving a creature straight out of a Renaissance painting in her wake. Her smooth, pale skin was replaced with crimson. Horns curled from the top of her head, the spadelike end of a tail swishing through the air behind her with impatience.

My mouth dropped open as I took in the small bat-like wings fluttering behind her, their pointed spines catching the light like polished obsidian. She wasn’t sitting *on* the desk anymore. No, she was fucking *hovering* above it.

“Well?” she asked, her voice clipped.

My hand flew to my chest, hunting for a gun that wasn’t there. My fingers dug into the fabric of my shirt, my heart hammering with fear.

Where the fuck is Dolly?

A few tense moments passed in silence, the demoness staring at me with slitted pupils as I tried to control my erratic breathing.

“I’m dead,” I whispered, rubbing anxiously at the spot where my gun should be.

Oh my fucking God. I died!

Fuck!

Shit! Shit! Shit!

How? Did Liam find me? Impossible. What the fuck would he be doing at a country bar in the industrial district?

Pan blew out a breath as she settled back onto the desk, shaking out her hair as her human disguise fell back into place. It didn’t help to calm my nerves.

“And in Hell, lucky you.”

“Nonna is going to fucking kill me,” I moaned, dropping my head in my hands.

And Gio. And Wes. I flinched away from the thought of my brother.

What was the last thing I said to him?

“Bit late for that,” the Headmistress deadpanned.

“I’m in—I didn’t—But I—” It was too much, my questions all trying to come out at once in a jumbled mess.

How did I die?

Aren’t good little girls who attend Sunday Mass supposed to have a one-way ticket into Heaven?

Was I a demon now too?

“Your student liaison will explain it in more detail.” She held out the folio and I took it slowly, looking at the front cover embossed with what could only be the school’s insignia. A clawed hand reached for a simple trophy, encapsulated by a shield with the letters ‘UU’ etched in a diagonal.

My fingers trembled as I opened the front cover, finding an acceptance letter. I glanced up at the demoness, who nodded in encouragement.

“Go on, read it.”

Dubiously, I returned my eyes to the page.

Dear Ms. Ricci,

Underworld University is pleased to congratulate you on your recent expiration and subsequent acceptance into our program for the 2022 C.E. academic year. This opportunity comes in recognition of your personal achievements and consequent debt. I am positive that you will be a valued member of our university.

In anticipation of the questions that you may have, I have enclosed a student starter package including a student handbook with a detailed account of our rules.

Your class schedule, along with a list of faculty members who will be leading your courses is also enclosed. If you feel that you need further information than provided within the student starter pack, please feel free to reach the Admissions Office via Coffin Messenger S.O. 3336 and they will do all that they can to assist in your transition.

A student liaison will be assigned to you upon your arrival, who will give you all further details regarding scheduling, extracurricular activities and school rules. Orientation will be held on the 26th of September, 2022 C.E. Please be advised that students are required to wear their University-issued uniforms during classes and official events.

Your accommodations have been marked on the attached campus map for your convenience.

We at Underworld University are honoured to welcome you to the first step of your Afterlife and wish you the very best as you work to clear your Soul Slate.

Yours Sincerely,

L. Pan

Headmistress Linda Pan
Class Two Demoness, Third Circle.

I THUMBED THROUGH THE PACKET, finding the map and class schedule as promised, along with the student handbook.

What. The. Fuck.

Classes? Student liaison? *UNIFORMS?!*

This had to be a dream. Nightmare. Whatever.

Bile rose in the back of my throat as panic seeped in and took up residence in my stomach. I took a few deep breaths, trying to calm my fraying nerves.

“What’s a Soul Slate?” I finally asked, looking up at the woman—demoness—and begging myself not to throw up.

She grinned, a manic gleam in her eye as she picked up another file off her desk, flipping it open. “It’s the sum of all your actions when you were alive. It tells us how long we’re supposed to torture you.” She held the file up to me. “This is what an average student’s file looks like when they reach us.” She dropped it back on the desk, collecting a file about four times the thickness of the previous one. “And this is yours!” she trilled, taking a deep inhale off the pages. “You were a very, *very* naughty little creature.”

I pressed my lips together in a hard line. “So, how many years of punishment do I have?”

She scoffed. “We don’t deal with years at the University—there’s too much of a disparity between the students. Instead, *all* of this is converted into an overall score.” She waved the file before dropping it back down onto the desk.

The door opened to my right, and a tall uniform-clad man about my age stepped over the threshold, his gaze appraising as it swept over me. His high cheekbones gave him a haughty look, especially when paired with his thick eyebrows and strong jaw.

“Oh good. Wrath. This is Rank 2000, of the freshman class.”

Wrath’s stare became predatory as it landed on my fitted jeans, a glimmer of mischief simmering behind his sea glass eyes. “Good evening, Headmistress.” His voice was a deep purr, a sumptuous smile curving his full lips as he met my eye. “Topsider.”

“Wrath will be your student liaison; he *graciously agreed* to give you a tour of the campus and explain some basics since you missed orientation last week. He’s in the freshman class with you,” Pan supplied, gesturing to Wrath like he was a dune buggy and I just guessed the correct price.

His black uniform pants, button-up shirt, and jacket were tailored to perfection. Thin maroon piping decorated the jacket’s edges, adding contrast to the subdued ensemble alongside the school’s emblem, embroidered onto his breast pocket in matching thread. He looked less like a private school asshole and more like a man in a custom-made suit.

Fucking delicious.

“If you’d be so kind as to follow me.” He waved at Pan and disappeared back through the door, not waiting to see if I followed.

I stood slowly, my feet much steadier as I trailed after him into the beautiful stone hall. The door snapped shut behind me with an audible click of the lock, leaving me unable to retreat.

“I swear it’s like Linda forgets I’m supposed to be torturing you, not the other way around.” He laughed as he shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his chinos. “How’d you die?”

“Murder, I guess.” I sighed, tucking the folio under my arm. “Don’t remember much after square dancing.”

Wrath ran his fingers through his golden hair, just long enough that you could fist it in your hands. Earrings along the shell of his ear caught the light and—of all things—a small cross dangled from the end. “Forgive me, but you don’t seem like the square dancing type.”

“I’m not.”

He grinned, flashing a lightly pointed incisor at me. “Sorry to hear it. For what it’s worth, I’m told it’s normal to be missing some time.”

“It is what it is.” I shrugged. The life expectancy for career criminals wasn’t particularly high. Living the life we did, you never knew what day would be your last.

It would be lying to say I didn’t feel a bit cheated though, I was sure I’d have more time.

I studied the arched windows inviting in thin bands of moonlight from the grounds beyond. “So, what? My eternity is... math class?”

“Something like that,” he replied, leading us down the hall.

“This isn’t really happening,” I muttered to myself, as if by saying it aloud I could change my new—unbelievable—reality. “No fucking way.”

“Oh, but it is.”

Questions burned my insides as I followed behind him into a large foyer. The dark stone flooring continued into the rectangular room, the walls panelled in a mix of beautifully carved stone and wood. Another hall continued opposite from where we entered, visible through the open double doors.

“This building is the administration offices and where some of the classes are held—Oh, and the ballroom,” Wrath explained, gesturing down the hall we came from as we stopped in the middle of the room. “Administration.” He turned and pointed down the opposite hall. “Student services, the infirmary and mail collection.”

“Infirmary?” I scoffed. “According to you assholes, I’m already dead! What else could happen?”

Wrath laughed quietly. “The magical warding around the university slows the healing period for human souls—like you—and removes a demon’s ability to return to Pandemonium.”

“Pandemonium? Like the club in *Lucifer*?” Wrath’s eyes narrowed and I raised my hands in front of me, waving them dismissively. “Forget it. You’re a demon too?”

“What else would I be?” he scoffed. “If we—demons, I mean—die on campus that’s it for us. They’re trying to prepare us for the realities of being Topside, I suppose.”

The hairs on my arms rose at the admission.

“Topside—you said that before—what does it mean?”

“Depends who you ask,” Wrath’s gaze was distant, like the thought was a source of pain for him. “Most commonly it means Earth, the plane of the living.”

“Right,” I muttered, even as my insides squirmed. “And for me? If I—uh—die on campus?” I asked, my voice hushed as I tried to see through his magic.

My curiosity burned. Would his true face be like the headmistress’ or would he be something else entirely?

“You would join the Erro, souls who have no hope for equilibrium. They travel the Nine Kingdoms until, eventually, their soul deteriorates so much they become part of Hell itself. Needless to say, try not to die on campus.”

I shivered. That sounded like a shitty way to spend eternity.

Wrath motioned behind me and I turned, on either side of a massive stone staircase were pairs of digitised screens cycling through names and numbers so quickly I hardly had a chance to read one or two before they were replaced.

“This is the class leaderboard. Each screen is for a different year so you’re only being judged against your peers, not the upperclassmen. They don’t usually change this much during the week, but there are fights going on right now. Lots of deals are being made.”

“Fights?”

“Don’t worry about that right now. Come on, I’ll show you the campus.” He turned away from the boards, exiting through a heavy wooden door into the cool evening air beyond. I followed him down the short flight of stairs onto the cobblestone path below.

As Wrath led us through campus I was surprised at how *normal* it seemed.

The buildings were a blend of gothic and modern architecture that felt like chocolate-covered bacon for the eyes. It shouldn’t work, but the two styles together created something deliciously unique.

“You barely made the lotto deadline, you know. Otherwise, you’d already be enjoying whatever creative means of torture my father and his ilk had designed for you. Oh, this is the library.”

I blinked. This asshole talked about torture as casually as if we were discussing the weather.

“What’s the point of all this? Why attend the University at all?”

Wrath seemed to consider this as we walked, his golden hair cast into silver in the moonlight. “Underworld University, and the others like it in this realm, were created so that demons could practice making soul contracts in a controlled environment.”

“So my entire Afterlife is just a simulation game for you?” I scowled, studying the large, castle-like building coming up ahead.

“Mm, I suppose so.” He stopped so suddenly that I walked into him, catching a whiff of a deep masculine cologne that had my toes curling in my boots. He turned, a teasing grin on his handsome features. “Careful, Topsider.” He purred, making my stomach twist with something caught between fear and lust. “Up ahead are the first-year dormitories.”

The campus was about ten city blocks, meaning that I could easily find my way with the map I’d been given. Even though the campus was a feast

for the senses, I was exhausted. I could explore tomorrow if this wasn't some kind of fucked up nightmare.

"No offence, dude, but I'm wiped. Can you show me to my room? And we can do the rest of this tour tomorrow? Or never."

"*Dude*," he repeated like I offended him, taking my hand in his and leading me into the castle with an irritated huff. His skin was shockingly warm, like an inferno was barely contained within the confines of his body.

The foyer broke off into two sides, one housing a huge mess hall with a few straggling students in uniforms that matched Wrath's. The opposite end looked like some kind of university shop, uniforms and books sat on racks alongside toiletries and coolers filled with to-go items.

Wrath bypassed both, climbing up the grand staircase to a landing with an elevator. He took out his phone as we waited for the carriage, typing at lightning speed. "Your room is on the ninth floor, second from the top."

"Is that good?" I asked as the doors swung wide and we stepped into the elevator.

Wrath didn't bother to let me go first.

"Has the second nicest view." His sea glass eyes swept me again, the corner of his mouth tipping into an arrogant smirk. "Well, third nicest now."

I rolled my eyes. "Has that ever worked for you?"

He took a sudden step forward. Crowding me against the metal doors of the elevator. With his body close to mine like this I could feel the warmth radiating off him, his breath ghosting over my ear as he leaned into my frame to press the button for my floor.

"I don't usually have to try very hard." He put two fingers under my chin as the lift began to move, his thumb tracing my jaw and scoring a line of fire to my lower lip where he pressed down. "A perk of being a prince."

"A what?" I asked weakly, my brain slow to catch up while Wrath's thumb pressed into my mouth.

His returning chuckle was dark, masculine, and dangerous. "A prince, *darling*."

I bit down on his thumb gently and he hissed, bringing his face close to mine and taking a deep inhale.

If this *was* a dream, what was the harm in playing along with whatever fantasy my brain provided?

“Fuck,” he groaned huskily. “You still smell like sunlight.” He licked a stripe up the side of my neck, his lips closing around the soft flesh of my earlobe for a gentle tug that turned my knees to jelly.

The doors to the elevator opened, nearly knocking us both to the floor. Wrath caught me with one arm around my waist, his other hand moving to his mouth to suck the finger I’d bitten, his pupils blown wide.

For a couple of long moments we stared at each other, then, like a spell had broken, Wrath’s business-like manner returned. He brushed past me, storming through a common room that I hardly had the time to acknowledge before he disappeared around a corner and down the hall, leaving me to chase after him.

I gave myself a shake.

What the fuck was that? The pull I’d felt in that elevator was suffocating. But now that there was space between us it was like the world had snapped back into focus.

“Put your hand on the doorknob and it will unlock; they use the same magic that keeps track of deals to assign rooms,” Wrath called from the end of the hall.

I slowed, biting down on a grin as he watched me approach with rapt attention. Sideling up beside him, I touched the door, feeling a gentle tingle against my palm as I turned the handle.

The room was surprisingly spacious, four-poster beds large enough to sleep two stood in pairs on either side of the room, heavy velvet hangings pulled open to show maroon bedspreads. It was obvious which of the beds was mine, the others sporting mussed sheets or posters hanging on the nearby walls.

“First years have to share rooms,” Wrath scoffed. “If you make it to the next semester the room assignments change.”

I ran my fingers along the bedpost, glancing around at the mismatched rugs and overflowing bookshelves.

“Will my roommates be like you?”

“Some.” Wrath came to meet me, bending to open the trunk at the end of the bed. It was full to the brim with uniforms, sportswear, pyjamas and a school bag. On top of a neatly folded stack of jumpers was a small box. He peeled back the cardboard to find the same phone that he’d been typing on in the hall.

A cursory look over the device found the buttons. A power button on the top and two buttons on the side I assumed were volume controls. The phone glowed to life in Wrath's hand, the background set to an image of the school crest. A number of preloaded apps adorned the home screen. He flipped through them quickly.

"Your schedule, Coffin Messenger—just type in a name and you can send a message to anyone at the academy—, a digital version of the shop downstairs." He tapped the screen a few times and then shoved the phone into my waiting palm.

"I set up the alerts for the leaderboard for you."

"Thanks?" I offered, tilting my head to the side as I glanced at the screen, I was currently in 2000/2000 of the freshman class. Dead last. Bottom of the pack. I wrinkled my nose. "I'm not doing very well."

Wrath's smile was predatory. The light in his jade eyes didn't seem born of happiness, more like malice. "Not for long, Topsider." he purred. "Get into uniform. You can't afford to be docked rank points. Showers are down the hall." He turned on his heel and stormed out of the room, letting the door swing shut with a snap that left me alone at last.

I turned to look around the room, reality settling over my like a dark cloud.

I'm dead.

Hell is real.

Demons—also real—are shockingly hot.

I flopped down on the bed, closing my eyes tight against the tears that were forming.

I wasn't sad. Fuck that. I was furious at Liam, who was the only reason I could have assumed I was in this ridiculous situation. And at myself for not listening to my instincts and cancelling that stupid fucking date.

I ran my hand over my heart, finding the material of my shirt rigid with dried blood. With a grimace, I pushed off the bed and collected a towel, stripping out of my filthy clothes and tossing them into the bin in the small half bath.

A shower would help me get my head on straight at least. There was something soothing about scrubbing off the day and having a few minutes of alone time to sort through everything.

I wrapped the towel around my body and sifted through the trunk once more until I found a small bag of toiletries. Collecting it, I snapped the

trunk shut and made my way, barefoot, back out into the hall.

The showers were at the end of the hallway. Split into humans and demons, though I doubted very much that the upstanding ‘*students*’ of Underworld University cared much about following signage. Half in hopes it would be cleaner and half that I could avoid facing another demon while naked, I stepped around the corner into the human showers.

A loud feminine moan met my ears, the unmistakable sound of flesh meeting flesh immediately following. At the close end of the white-tiled shower—which was big enough to fit at least ten fixtures—a pair of women didn’t bother to cease their fucking as a surprised huff of air left my lips. The first was pinned against the wall, her leg dangling over her partner’s shoulder as the brunette feasted on her cunt, fucking her with slow-moving fingers.

I found myself frozen as I watched them. Against the wall, the blonde’s breasts heaved with her heavy breaths and whimpering moans, her fingers playing with her own hardened nipples.

“Riot—fuck—yes! Don’t stop!”

With a few more passes of Riot’s tongue, the blonde shuddered in her release, her moan high and bright.

Riot set the girl’s leg down on the tiles and stood, supporting her weight as the blonde leaned against her with weak knees. She brought her fingers up to her mouth and licked them clean, sucking on her digits for several long seconds as her head turned to meet my shocked gaze.

“Oh,” Riot chuckled, dragging her lips up the girl’s neck. “Frenchie, you should have told me we had company,” she purred, gripping the girl’s throat to tip her face up to hers for a passionate kiss.

I was rooted to the spot, unable to tear my eyes away from the pound of water over Riot’s muscular back. Ink dusted her shoulders and trailed down her spine in a cascade of what looked, at first, like a dragon but began to shift and move as I tried to focus on it, the skin moving quickly from the bottle tan of the shore to an opalescent paleness. Soft feminine curves were replaced by a wide back and thick bands of muscle under unmarked flesh. The dark hair that had only a moment before been gripped in Frenchie’s fingers shortened to shag on the top of Riot’s head.

A demon. I thought, my tongue darting out to lick my dry lips.

I should have been disgusted. *Terrified.*

But as Wrath's sharp green gaze floated in my imagination I found myself clenching my thighs together.

Some Catholic you are.

Riot released Frenchie suddenly, grabbing a towel from the stack folded beside the shower and wrapping it around their waist, leaving their now flat chest on display as they approached. The imprint of a massive cock pressed against the scrap of terrycloth, drawing my traitorous eyes.

"Thanks," they purred in my ear as they passed, looking out of the corner of their navy eyes at me. "I do love an audience." They winked and slapped my ass, forcing a yelp of surprise from my parted lips.

"Hey!"

Riot stiffened, inhaling deeply. "Oh—You *are* a fresh one aren't you?" They leaned back, running the tip of their nose along my neck so quickly I didn't have time to react, their lips ghosting along my jaw. "I can still taste the surface on you, Topsider. And someone else." They pulled away, tsking. "Have you already found someone to play with tonight?"

I stepped away quickly, scowling, "Fuck off, demon."

Riot snorted. "I'm a *shapeshifter*," they drawled, running a hand through their inky hair. "You know—can change my appearance at will? Into anyone or anything—so long as it's living, that is." They leaned forward into my personal space, their navy eyes full of amusement. "My name is Poison, by the way."

"I thought—"

"I was just borrowing my friend's face for a bit of fun. Bye, Topsider!" Poison stood straight, winked again and disappeared into the hall.

Frenchie was close behind, wrapped in a towel that somehow managed to close over her massive breasts. She nodded to me curtly and flashed a smile that was all teeth. "Don't get any ideas—they're taken, loser!"

I sighed as the door banged shut behind her.

Turns out that mean girls were a part of the collegiate package in hell too. Awesome.

I needed to wash this fucked up day off of me and read my stupid orientation package. Hopefully, something in there would help me make sense of the demented fantasyland I'd stumbled into.

And maybe, if I was quick, I could even stumble into a fantasy of my own creation before I headed back to my room.

DICE

FOUR

The noise coming from the spectator deck was enough to shake the foundations of the Pit. The metal grates above the dirt floor of the arena were filled to bursting with demons and topsiders alike, their eyes trained on the two fighters below.

On any other night, I'd have been thrilled that Riot was fighting so much. When she was in the ring, my wagers were as good as a guarantee—keeping me well within the top fifty percent and safe from expulsion.

But *tonight*?

I looked through the chain link fence with apprehension burning down my spine. It'd been three months since she'd bonded the ninth circle demon we'd summoned. Every day she got stronger, faster—a little less careful.

Thin wisps of smoke drifted off her back and shoulders as she threw blow after punishing blow into Gauntlet's face from her perch on top of a spray-painted wooden crate. Blood sprayed as his nose shattered, coating her wrapped knuckles in a fresh coat of crimson.

Gauntlet had to have at least two feet on Riot's petite frame and about two hundred pounds. His muscular forearms flexed as he made to grab for her waist, Riot dancing to the side and out of reach of his tattooed fingers.

"She's a machine tonight," Chips hollered from somewhere above, over the tumultuous shouts as Riot threw herself at Gauntlet, dragging his massive frame to the ground with a combination of force and the full brunt of her body weight.

Riot's long, dark hair swayed behind her as she tried to get her much smaller frame wrapped around Gauntlet's neck. She screamed and clawed

at his hands as they captured her ankles, trying to peel her away from him.

“Where’s Spinner?” I grunted to myself, worry lining my brow as I watched the black vapour continue to slough off her body. I’d already tried rubbing my eyes twice tonight. I wasn’t imagining it, the smoke was definitely there.

It was a problem I’d have to bring up with Wrath. Maybe he’d know what was causing it. Fucking bookworm.

Gauntlet tucked his hands under Riot’s thighs, flipping her onto her back.

I didn’t have time to shout before he was raining blows down on her, caging her in with his colossal body. He’d fucking played her, let her think she was winning only to turn the tables at the last second.

It was a dirty, underhanded move.

If it was against anyone else I would have *loved* it.

Riot’s nose shattered after another hit, her eyes rolling back as she lost consciousness.

I threw myself into motion, climbing the fence and dropping into the arena.

“She’s out! *Enough!*” I shouted, grabbing Gauntlet’s bicep before he could land another punch.

“What? Worried I’ll kill her?” Gauntlet laughed, smearing Riot’s blood over his face and buzzed head with his hands like war paint. He looked down at my unconscious friend with a curl to his lip. “Not so tough now, are you?”

“Get off her,” I growled, throwing my shoulder into his.

I wasn’t a small guy, but Gauntlet towered over me. The big bastard had to be damn near seven feet tall. I wasn’t afraid to fight him if I had to. Just because Riot was the boxer between us didn’t mean I couldn’t hold my own. I was a second circle demon for fucksakes.

Gauntlet held my eye for a few long seconds before standing, his pug-like face calculating.

“Next time you get in my ring, Dice, I’ll take it as an invitation to turn your bones into dust.” He spat one of his teeth onto the ground and turned on his heel, disappearing into the darkened corridor that fed into the lobby.

I crouched down beside Riot and used my fingers to gently pry open her uninjured eye, inspecting the iris.

Out like a fucking light.

I looked above at the crowd, finding Spinner—one of the two friends I had outside of Three Heads of Cerberus, the name used to describe Riot, Wrath and me—red-faced and glaring down at the two of us.

What the fuck did he want me to do about losing a few bets?

I'd lost pretty big on that fight myself, but given the odds, it could have been worse.

If Riot was a sure thing, Gauntlet was a god striking down all my best-laid plans.

Spectators began to filter out of the arena. Fuck fanfare. If you wanted a show you could go to one of the clubs in the city. Down here in the Pit it was all about the fight itself. No one stuck around for trophies or applause.

I slapped Riot's cheek gently. "Hey, dumbass. Time to wake up."

No response.

I sighed and scooped her up, slinging her over my shoulder. She wasn't heavy, but it was annoying to have to drag her out of here.

Fucking asshole. She knew better than to let Gauntlet get her on the ground. But she'd been fighting like that all night—overconfident and sloppy.

I made it through the tunnel and outside before Chips—the last of the people I would actually call my *friend*—caught up to us.

"Spins is pissed." His small, watery eyes didn't meet mine as he scratched at the uneven growth of five o'clock shadow dusting his weak jaw. "She okay?"

"Think so. We'll let her sleep it off."

"Uh, Boss?"

I grunted, shifting Riot's weight on my shoulder as we picked through the wooded path towards the dorms.

"If she has a concussion—"

"She'll be fine," I interrupted with a glare.

It wasn't public knowledge that we'd bonded Riot to a demon, but she'd needed an anchor to the Underworld if we all wanted to go Topside together. That meant she wasn't as likely to drop dead from something as mundane as a concussion, but it also meant that I wasn't keen to tell Chips fuck all about it.

“Alright, Boss,” Chips muttered. In the moonlight, the slight haunch of his shoulders made him look ghoulish—sort of a funny thing to think about a demon. “How much did you lose tonight?”

I didn’t even want to think about it. At the end of the day, ranks would be made and lost a hundred times over before the semester was out. As long as I was in the top fifty percent, who cared? It wasn’t like they’d expel *me*.

There were some perks to being the Prince’s best friend.

“Less than Spinner if the look he gave me before we left said anything.”

Chips hissed a laugh as we came up to the front of the castle-like building that housed our rooms. He stepped forward to open the door, waiting until I carried Riot inside.

“All that violence made me hungry. See you tomorrow, Boss,” he called, heading for the mess with a wave.

I returned the motion and headed for the elevator, the carriage doors sliding open the second that I pressed the call button.

Tiny miracles. I spent enough time in the gym that Riot wasn’t unmanageably heavy, but her dead weight was starting to drag. I selected the button for floor nine, willing the trip to go faster.

The little lights flashed as we climbed, passing through the floors.

One. Two. Three. Four—

A fist connected with the side of my head, hard enough to make my brain rattle inside my skull. Riot screamed, thrashing in my hold until I dropped her. Springing up from the floor she threw herself at me, clawing at my face with her hands.

“Riot! *Riot!*” I shouted, as the carriage filled with wisps of that same black smoke from the arena. I threw my hands out, grabbing her shoulders and using my longer arms to my benefit to hold her away from me.

Her sclera had disappeared into blackness as she screamed, leaving scratches over my body wherever she could reach bare skin.

I shook her hard. “Riot! For fucksakes! It’s me! It’s *Dice!*”

She blinked a few times and sagged in my hold, the smoke dissipating like it had never existed.

What. The. Fuck.

“What happened?” she slurred.

“Gaunt took you out for a minute. Put you right to sleep.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

“How much are you out?”

I shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. Can you stand on your own?”

She rubbed her nose on the back of her hand, smearing blood against her skin as she swayed in place. “I feel like shit.”

I grabbed her arm and pulled it over my shoulder as the doors opened, leading her through the common room and down the hall. “You look like it, too.”

It wouldn’t take long for her fractured nose to heal—even with our stunted regeneration on campus, a few hours and it would be good as new. Well, if I set it straight for her.

She growled without heat as we reached her door, her hand grazing the knob so I could open it for us.

The door swung open, revealing her two roommates. Mouse had her nose buried in a book, curled up in the window seat where she’d spent the bulk of the last two weeks. She looked up as we entered, wrinkling her nose.

“Jesus Christ.”

“Dice will do,” I teased, dumping Riot onto her maroon bedspread with a soft ‘oof’. My friend reached up to her shattered nose, scoffing.

“Fucker. Did he have to go for my face?”

Poison pulled their headphones down to rest on their bare shoulders. *Of course* they were shirtless, showing off the deep V cut of their abdomen as it disappeared into the low-slung band of their grey academy-issued sweatpants. The stupid prick hardly ever wore clothes. Not that there was much point considering the shapeshifter spent more time fucking than they did sleeping.

“You alive, Riri?” they called, their fingers ghosting over the keyboard on their lap.

“Barely,” Riot mumbled, closing her eyes. “Give me a minute, Dice. I’ll need help washing the blood off.”

“Yeah, sure.” I sat on the end of Riot’s bed, facing Mouse. “I didn’t see you at the fight.”

“I always find out how they end anyway.” She cast a pointed look at her battered roommate.

“Fair enough.”

“It looks bad,” Mouse muttered, flicking a page in her book. “Can’t have been a good night for either of you.”

She didn’t know the half of it.

The debt I’d racked up tonight was... I’d worry about it later.

I always came out on top eventually.

Besides, Riot would heal and be back in the ring by next week. The bruising around her eyes was already beginning to change colours. Part of bonding her with that ninth circle meant she’d be more like us than a topsider now. Good thing too; otherwise her penchant for solving her problems with her fists would eventually end with her joining the Erro. Kind of a bummer to visit your best friend while they’re on an eternal slog through the Nine Kingdoms. Or worse, had given up and become one with the rocks or some shit.

“You should have seen the other guy,” Poison sneered in a perfect imitation of Riot’s voice.

Fucking shapeshifter. At least they didn’t transform into her. I didn’t really need to see her tits *again*.

I growled, something waspish on the tip of my tongue to aim at the useless fuck when the door swung open again.

The fresh, warm smell of grass, open air, and ripe summer berries drifted into the room with the force of a truck. My breath caught.

A *topsider*. A very freshly deceased topsider.

Every pair of eyes in the room—save for Riot’s whose entire body had stiffened, but wasn’t in good enough shape to turn her head—were suddenly locked on the newcomer.

It didn’t help that she was in a towel that *barely* dusted her smooth thighs, a strawberry pink blush creeping up her chest towards her face. Her big brown eyes were framed by long lashes that only added to the whole doll-faced thing she had going on.

“Uh, hi,” she muttered in an irritated tone, pushing her long, wet hair over her shoulder.

Poison’s smile was lecherous. “Have a nice shower?”

Her gaze caught on the shapeshifter and she pinked ever more before scowling.

“Life changing.”

“Afterlife changing,” they corrected.

I hopped from my spot on Riot's bed, making her hiss in pain as I jostled the mattress.

"Dickhead," she muttered.

I grinned in apology, crossing to meet the new arrival. As if I'd miss an opportunity to taste the surface—or to fuck a girl that Poison hadn't gotten their filthy hands on. Riot was fine anyway. At least until I could talk to Wrath about whatever the fuck was going on with the whole smoking thing. And attacking me in the elevator.

Fuck, the list of concerns was getting out of hand.

"What's a pretty little thing like you doing in a *towel* in a dump like this?" I asked, smoothing my hair with my hand and leaning against a bedpost.

"Hey!" protested Mouse at the same time the new arrival replied with a sneer.

"Freezing my ass off, thanks for asking. Can you move? I'd like to get dressed."

"You must be the new roommate," Mouse grinned, her straight, white teeth in stark contrast with her deep brown skin. "Finally a little more oestrogen in here."

Riot scoffed in protest.

"You don't count. You're insane," Mouse snapped back.

"What, I'm not girl enough for you, Mousey?" Poison drawled, their chameleon-like skin shifting until they were a perfect replica of her delicate frame. They held their keyboard up to hide their equally flat chest.

Mouse wrinkled her nose and sighed. "Just because Riot lets you borrow hers doesn't mean you can borrow mine." She hopped from the bench, offering her hand to the brunette goddess dripping onto the carpets. "Don't mind these assholes, I'm Mouse."

"I'm O—"

"What's your rank, we'll call you by number until the demons name you." I cut in, casting a sidelong glance at the shapeshifter lounging in their own skin once more against their pillows. "Trust me, you don't want them to have your name."

She wrinkled her nose but seemed to relax a little, shaking Mouse's hand. "It's good to see another person in this freakshow."

“Technically Frenchie is a person, if you mean that demons aren’t. You know, the girl from the showers?” Poison waved their phone in the air, their keyboard discarded to the side. “Rank two thousand? Topsider, you were a very naughty girl.”

“Two thousand?” I gasped, blinking.

Couldn’t be, she seemed too normal for a girl who was at the bottom of the class.

Usually, anyone ranked fifteen hundred and below had an air about them. Like they couldn’t hold in their crazy.

She bristled, opening her trunk and collecting a pair of pyjamas from its depths.

I sidled up beside her, rubbing the back of my neck before offering it to her. “I’m Dice, rank nine.” I couldn’t help the way my attention lingered over the curve of her ass—or the way my heart sped up as her gaze met mine.

“Good for you.” She rolled her eyes at my outstretched hand but shook anyway, releasing me as quickly as she could.

It didn’t escape my attention that she barely reached my shoulder—at a towering 6’7” that wasn’t unusual—making her practically pocket-sized. Cute. And spicy. Her attitude radiated off her in waves you could practically see in the air.

“You were rank nine,” Mouse corrected. “He’s rank sixty-four now.”

I winced, casting a glance at Riot’s face, twisted in frustration.

“How much did you bet on me tonight?” she asked, her eyes narrowed as she pushed herself up into a sitting position.

“That bloody mess over there is Riot,” Poison said unhelpfully, hooking their thumb towards her. “But you already knew that.” Their wink was suggestive and *irritating*.

Would it kill them to shut their trap for five minutes?

“Holy Hell girl, what did you do to rack up a debt like that?” Mouse asked, her eyes glued to her phone as her thumbs went lightning-fast over the tempered glass of the screen.

Tension radiated from her as she shrugged a shoulder, turning and heading for the bathroom. “Does it matter? I’m sure there are people here who’ve done worse.”

“Want some help in there?” Poison called, earning them a glare as she snicked the bathroom door shut.

Her muffled “Fuck off!” came through the wood.

My heart pounded in my chest. Brunette? Check. Big brown eyes that you could get lost in? Check. Curves that *definitely* drew the eye? Check. Not impressed by the shapeshifting dickhead? Check *plus!*

Two Thousand might just be my fucking dream girl.

OLIVIA

FIVE

I slept like shit.

Between the sound of my new roommates' breathing—snoring in the case of Riot, not a surprise given her busted nose—and weird dreams about Liam stalking me down a darkened alley before I was whisked away on a pair of soft white wings... I'd gotten a couple of hours, tops.

I'd guessed that it must be daylight, whatever that looked like here, because I could hear my roommates stirring. Hopefully, they'd get dressed and leave. I wasn't feeling up to being social. Tossing and turning all night had given me too much time to think, and now I was in a hell of a mood.

I rolled onto my back in the darkened alcove of my bed hangings, collecting my phone from under my pillow where I'd slid it the night before. I'd been so exhausted once I'd changed into my pyjamas I'd crawled directly into my bed and closed the curtains. Luckily, even the cocky asshole—Dice—understood that meant I was done talking for the night.

Okay, so he wasn't *all* bad. He'd given me a good tip about the name thing. And those biceps. You could crack a fucking walnut with those things.

I swiped my thumb over the tempered screen, scrolling to the bottom. A rush of relief flooded me. My photo—*How the fuck did they get that? At least I looked cute. It appeared to be one of my own selfies from when I was alive*—was now beside number one thousand and ninety-eight.

Tiny miracles. Maybe it wouldn't be so hard to reach one thousand after all.

With the way everyone reacted to my rank last night, it was clear that I'd need to climb, and *quickly*, if I wanted to avoid unnecessary attention. The only matter was, how the fuck was I supposed to do that? I was okay at academics, but Wrath had alluded that classes weren't the only way to make it out on top.

My gut told me the skills that landed me here would be the ticket to my success. I supposed I should thank my lucky stars that Gio didn't expect me to play the part of the subservient housewife to some limp-dicked associate of his. Instead, Wes and I were trained as a unit, armed with a rucksack full of talents that would prepare us to run *la famiglia* when the time came.

Wes would have to take over for Gio now, our subtle tug-of-war finished with me out of the picture. The thought made me sick. I'd worked my whole life—busted my ass and risked jail time—for what? So that my brother, who mostly wanted the job so that he could keep me safe, could take over the family business?

Anger burned through me like acid.

If haunting is an option when I get out of here, I'm going to fuck up Liam's life so hard.

I dropped my phone into the bed and scrubbed my hands over my face. Tears pricked at my eyes, warning I was quickly approaching the boundary I'd managed to slam over my feelings in the shower.

How did Gio's job go last night? Did they find my body yet? Did Wes get any sleep when I didn't come home? Will either of those idiots remember to download Nonna the Bible app?

The Bible. I laughed bitterly.

Some good my Catholic devotion did for me, I went to church every Sunday for my entire 22 years of life. And sure, I thought it was a bit of a long con, but it was hard to argue that I'd fucked up pretty spectacularly to end up here.

Would my mom and dad be here too? Ricky?

Light spilled onto the sheets as Mouse parted the bed curtains, poking her head through the gap.

"Oh! You're awake." She grinned toothily. "Wanna go for breakfast?"

As though the question reminded my body to feel hunger, my stomach growled.

I hesitated, naturally wary of a stranger showing interest. I'd been burned before by snakes trying to get into Gio's good graces. Reminding myself that none of that mattered here, I set aside my distrust. My roommate seemed nice enough, with a familiar accent that put my nerves at ease. I needed an ally—a *friend*—in this place. Someone who could get me up to speed. Even if that meant I didn't trust her.

"Yeah, sure."

She stepped away, tugging the hangings open. "Good thing you weren't masturbating. That would have been awkward."

I smirked, tossing the blankets off me and jumping out of bed to dig through my trunk and find a red and black plaid skirt that matched my roommate's. "Would have been a really quiet orgasm."

"Loud, are you?" she teased, pulling her leather messenger bag over a blazer-clad shoulder. "At least try and make sure you're alone then."

I snorted a laugh. Given the rest of my roommates were mercifully absent, I dressed in the middle of the room. I wasn't shy about my body, anyway. Mouse turned around politely while I buttoned my blouse, her phone in her hand once more.

Speaking of our absent roommates. "Where is everyone?"

"Riot took off for the nurse after I threatened to break her nose some more if she didn't stop snoring."

"Thank fuck. I was ready to choke her out."

Mouse grinned, offering me a bag that matched hers. I shouldered it, surprised by its weight. A cursory look told me that it'd been packed with notebooks, a pencil case, and a thin tablet with a matching stylus.

"Poison is doing whatever they do during the day—not a clue, honestly. We have a few classes together, but I wouldn't call us friends or anything." She tsked, motioning to my outfit. "Roll your skirt. You look like a fucking nun."

I didn't have to be told twice. The uniforms were cute, if not a bit conservative. I rolled the waistband until the skirt hit my mid-thigh, instead of at the knee where it'd been before. My blazer was black, identical to the one Wrath wore yesterday except for some gentle darts at the waist that accentuated the curve of my hips.

Nonna would have loved it. She always liked it when I wore preppier clothes; she said they made me look more like a lady. Which I usually

returned with a scowl and a rude comment about how it was difficult to blend with the crowd in pastels.

The memory made my heart ache.

“There should be some toiletries in the side table. But we can stop by the Hub to get you anything else you need later.”

I nodded, opening the drawer to find a fully stocked makeup bag and hair brush.

“This looks just like the one I had before—”

Mouse flopped down onto the window seat, kicking her feet up. “Demon magic, obv’s.”

“Obv’s,” I parroted, unnerved as I headed into the bathroom, leaving the door open as I quickly put myself together.

“They don’t want us bartering for goods so they provide us anything we could want,” she called as I opened and closed the drawers in the walnut vanity until I found one that was empty—save for a sealed toothbrush and toothpaste. I tossed my makeup bag inside and brushed my teeth quickly. A few quick strokes of the hairbrush and I was done, inspecting myself in the mirror.

For someone who was shot yesterday, I looked weirdly normal.

“Ready?” Mouse asked.

“Yeah, let’s go eat.” I headed for the hall, pausing at the door to hold it open for her to pass when a thought occurred to me. “Do you always adopt strays?”

She shrugged, “Evil eye bracelet, sticking your nose up at everyone and everything? I knew girls like you when I was alive, you’re just missing the cross necklace. They went to a private academy though, not Bronx Public like me.” She grabbed a scrap of red silk from around her bedpost. “Besides, you met our other roommates—it’s slim pickings around here for non-psychotic friends. Put this on, ties are tragically mandatory, even on weekends, if you’re wearing the uniform.”

“You’re from New York?” I asked in surprise.

“Yup, born and raised. Jersey, right?”

I huffed, taking the offered tie and making quick work of it as we walked down the hall. “That obvious?”

“To me? Yes. To anyone else here? Probably not. Only half the class is human, and there were way less New Yorkers than you’d think.”

“No pizza rat?”

Mouse laughed. “No pizza rat.”

We reached the common room, my lips parting in surprise at the space I’d barely taken in last night. Students lounged in clusters of cozy armchairs or on sofas, some watching a flat-screen television playing a movie I’d seen a few times about a wannabe journalist working at a fashion magazine as the late morning sun drifted in through arched stained glass windows.

I blinked in surprise—*not stained glass*—the sky beyond the window was actually scarlet with thin wisps of grey clouds bobbing along in the breeze.

Heaps of bean bag chair-like pillows were clustered in one corner of the room, plush carpets adding to the overall vibe of comfort in the space. A fire burned in the grate, offering warmth and—*fuck*—this place was awesome.

I wanted to fall right into that big pile of cushions and stay there for hours.

Mouse pressed the button to call the elevator and we stepped inside. I leaned over her to press the button for the ground floor, my face heating as the memory of Wrath’s golden hair and pale green eyes pushed to the front of my mind. I always did have a thing for assholes.

“Why do you think you’re here?” I asked conversationally, leaning against a polished wall.

Mouse ran a hand over her tightly curled hair, her smile sheepish. “Theft, probably. You? It must be juicy with a rank like that.”

I looked at my companion sidelong.

How much should I share? She’d been helpful so far. And if I wanted to climb the class rank I’d need allies. I fought the urge to bring my thumbnail to my mouth as I thought. Trust was a two-way street, and without the backing of *la famiglia* I’d need to learn how to make my own connections. Figure out how to find out if people were trustworthy without the promise of Ricky and Leo finding them in a dark alley.

Ricky.

What would he tell me to do?

His confident, brassy voice popped into my mind instantly. *Trust your instincts and always eat the imported prosciutto first.*

I swallowed the lump in my throat. My stupid cousin had a point—and I wasn’t talking about the cured ham. My instincts were telling me that

meeting a fellow New Yorker was more like fate than coincidence. I needed to trust that, even a little bit.

“Running scrubbed weapons, probably.”

Mouse choked a laugh. “Jesus Christ, girl! Alright, you can tell me that story over coffee and cornflakes.”

“Please tell me cornflakes aren’t my only option,” I groaned as the elevator doors parted, the pair of us heading towards the cafeteria.

“Oh, no. For being, y’know...” she motioned slicing her throat with her thumb out of her closed fist, “*Hell*. They treat us alright.”

We entered through a set of double doors into the massive hall. Stations lined the back of the room in a way that reminded me a bit of a deli; the front half of the space filled with lunch tables and seats in a circular pattern. In its middle, slightly sunken into the floor, was a single, empty table—despite the students lingering around the room.

I shot a look at Mouse, raising my eyebrows.

She shrugged her shoulders, steering me towards a rack of plastic trays. “That’s where The Ten sit.”

“The Ten?” I asked, collecting a tray and sliding it down the metal railing.

We passed by refrigerated coolers of drinks, cups of cut fruit and vegetables and other grab n’ go options that all looked fantastic. I grabbed an apple for later, my heart set on something warm, comforting, and full of carbs.

As we got to the front of the line my lips popped open in surprise. Small, hunched creatures that reminded me of gargoyles waited for us to order from the dishes on offer like angry, stony, lunch ladies.

“The top ten students in the freshman class. They’re basically untouchable,” Mouse explained as I asked for waffles with strawberries and cream. She ordered eggs, bacon, and toast. The two of us collected our plates from the monstrous servers before stopping off at the coffee station. Mouse grabbed a steaming cup of liquid life, and I grabbed a bottled iced latte before we picked a table along the edge of the room.

“Is everyone in this dormitory a freshman?”

She bobbed her head, cutting into the jammy yolk of her egg with her fork. “Yup, they expel half of the class at the end of every year. The upperclassmen have their own dorms.”

I ran the numbers in my head, my fingers drumming on the lunch table. “So, what—less than two hundred and fifty of our class will graduate?”

“Exactly.” Mistaking the incredulous look on my face for nerves, she waved her dark hand dismissively. “Don’t worry, a few lucky deals and you’ll be in the top thousand in no time.”

“What do you mean *deals*?” I asked, cracking the cap on my drink and taking a sip. Surprisingly, it wasn’t that bad. A little sweet for my taste, but not too acidic.

“Didn’t you read the handbook?” Mouse scoffed.

I rolled my eyes. “Between my murder and the guests in our room last night, I’ve had no time.”

“Fine, fine.” She took a sip of her coffee, glancing around the room. “Christ, where do I even start? Good academic standing is mandatory, so you can’t just flunk your classes and hope to make up ranks with deals. But most of the big movement happens outside of classes. It’s kind of like... making bets. But you aren’t always betting on outcomes. Sometimes it’s kind of an if I do this, then you’ll do that scenario.”

“So, what, I need to... gamble to move up?”

“Or make trades, but given your placement? I think gambling would be easier.”

I sighed, glancing around the room. “So I need to make it to at least rank nine hundred ninety-nine by the end of the year?”

“Yup. We get a two-week holiday break in December, too. Which you’d know *if* you read the welcome packet.”

I groaned, running my hands through my hair. About a thousand ranks in a few months; probably not impossible, but definitely difficult.

Mouse scrolled on her phone, her fork laying forgotten on her plate. “I think you can do it. You just need to be quick on your feet and figure out how to work the system.” She placed the phone down on the table, turning it towards me with a grin. “You’ll want to memorise this.”

I pulled the phone a little closer, abandoning my coffee.

Underworld University Code of Ethics

1. Deals are permitted between students of any designation.
2. A deal must be made by two willing parties.

3. Once the parameters of a deal are agreed upon no alterations will be made.
4. Cheating by demons is prohibited as outlined in the Demonic Code.
5. Participants may barter any outcome, provided that both parties feel their incentive has equal value.

Failure to comply with any of the above guidelines will result in a forfeiture by the offending party.

I chewed my thumbnail thoughtfully, my brain whirring with possibilities. You didn't grow up in a family like mine without learning how to bend the rules.

"I'm hoping whatever this intense thought thing you're doing right now is your scheming face."

"It is." I read through the rules again, and again. "Is it me or do these have a lot of wiggle room?"

Mouse grinned, retrieving her phone and clicking the screen off. "I knew I'd like you. Nothing stops us from playing by their rules."

"Right." I hummed thoughtfully, reclaiming my plate and bringing a bite of waffle to my lips. They were fluffy and warm, but not as good as Nonna's. A twinge of guilt bloomed in my stomach, killing my appetite, and I pushed my tray away, choosing to fiddle with the label of my bottled coffee instead.

How is she going to take the news?

As if Mouse could sense my souring mood, Mouse pushed her plate away too, pulling her bag up onto the table and freeing her tablet from inside. "You missed a lot of classwork last week." She tapped the screen to life. "I'll send you my notes to your CM—Coffin Messenger—and the homework. But I'd probably do the readings today. Apparently, next week will be even more intense."

"Wait—they give us *homework*?"

"Oh fuck yeah. First years take all kinds of stuff too; demon politics and history, arithmancy, ancient languages and runes, magical sciences—that's some crazy potion-making shit. We even have to take PE."

I groaned, laying my head on the cool surface of the table.

"Don't worry, you'll catch up. I could help you if you want?"

“Yes, absolutely. There was a seriously comfy-looking corner of the common room begging to be studied in,” I said, lifting my head to look at my new friend.

“Are you done?” Mouse dropped her tablet back into her bag, motioning to our plates, and I nodded. “Let’s get started then. We need to cram a week’s worth of introduction into two days.”

“Yeah, that sounds good.” I stood from the table, reaching for my largely untouched plate.

“Don’t. The Class Zeros will get it.”

“Class Zeros?”

“Service demons,” she supplied between hurried, last-minute bites of her breakfast. “So low-level they don’t even make it on the chart.”

“Right. The chart,” I muttered, unnerved.

Exactly how much had I missed in my first week? It seemed like my roommate already knew how most of this place worked. My hand tightened around the strap of my bag until my knuckles were white. I hated going into a job without all the facts.

“You’ll get it, One Thousand Nine Hundred Ninety-Eight.”

I groaned internally and stalked out of the hall with Mouse at my heels—a piece of jam-covered toast clutched in her hand. This no-name business was really getting on my nerves.

POISON

SIX

I dressed quickly, shifting from Riot's soft curves into my preferred body's flat chest and narrow hips as Frenchie teased a hand through her knotted hair.

One of these days she'd call me over, and I'd tell her to fuck off and try her luck with Riot herself if she wanted her so bad. Today was not that day.

She wiped smeared lipstick from the corner of her mouth, her eyes fixed on her reflection. "That was fun, P. I'll call you again soon?"

"I thought since it was so close to dinner we could go down together," I offered, buttoning my shirt.

"Can't," she tutted with mock sadness. "I'm meeting my friends, and we're going to a party."

I bit the side of my cheek, stamping down on the sting of rejection. Who was I kidding anyway? Frenchie had no real interest in *me*. She was just looking to get a piece of Riot. And since *she* didn't want anything to do with the blonde, I was the next best thing. Besides, I got what I wanted anyway, right? Enough rank points to keep me comfortably in The Ten and a half decent orgasm.

It only cost being the lapdog of any student looking for a little physical contact. It was fun... sometimes. But days like today? It sucked.

"Yeah, okay," I said, my voice wooden. "Have fun."

I opened the door to the half bath and stormed into the dormitory beyond. Lucky waited on Frenchie's bed, his mouth turned into a sneer as he adjusted his lanky frame against her pillows. His orange hair clashed

horribly with the maroon sheets, crooked nose turned up as we met each other's eye.

"Poison," he grunted as I passed.

I straightened my spine, twisting my face into a leer. "You looking for a piece too, Lucky Charms? My sloppy seconds are waiting."

He scoffed, his face reddening. The door had already banged shut behind me before he could come up with a snide remark in response.

I'd resigned myself to another afternoon alone with my piano—taking the elevator and cutting through the common room to grab a snack on the way back to the dorm. Something sweet should help to ease the bitter twinge in my chest. And if not, a cigarette would certainly do the trick.

Friends. I thought bitterly as I weaved through clusters of students. Sure, I knew a lot of people—fucked them, really—but once I'd served my usefulness it was a repeat of Frenchie. See you *never*.

I was fine on my own anyway. Who needed stupid friends? And tomorrow was Monday. Classes were always a good distraction; they kept me busy.

"Poison?" called a soft, feminine rasp.

I kept walking, sure I'd imagined it. No one ever bothered me when I was walking around campus. My *appointments* were all booked discreetly through messages or email.

"Poison!" the voice called again, more insistent.

I turned my head, finding the topsider lounging on a two-seater couch, her arms draped over the back of the cushions as she met my eye.

"Roomie," I drawled, my lips ticking up into a smile.

She'd been so busy studying yesterday that we'd hardly spoken. Even now, she had her tablet dangling from her hand, her hair twisted into a messy knot on the top of her head with what looked like the stylus holding it in place.

"We're just starting a movie, do you want to watch it with us?" Her eyes glittered with interest as she studied me in my rumpled uniform, gaze dipping to take in my body before meeting my eyes again.

"You've certainly changed your tune." I sighed internally. These fucking humans only ever wanted one thing, and after she'd gotten an eyeful of Frenchie and me in the baths Friday it was only a matter of time.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious who the new girl would ask me to be for her. Riot? That one was getting old. Fast. Dice, maybe? They had a

real vibe going on a couple of days ago.

"I think we got off on the wrong foot," she said as I rounded the sofa. "I figure if we're going to live together we might as well try and be friends."

"Friends?" I repeated numbly as she tossed her tablet onto the low coffee table.

"Yup," she popped the 'p', looking up at me from where she reclined against the armrest. "Demons *do* have friends, don't they?"

I lifted the topsider's legs at the ankle, sliding onto the loveseat with her and setting her legs back across my lap. "I suppose so."

She moved to sit up but I gently placed my hand on her lower stomach.

"You don't have to move unless you want to. I don't mind, baby." I leered down at her, and she rolled her eyes.

Not that she'd have anything to offer with a rank as low as hers. She couldn't afford a deal with me.

The topsider relaxed, pressing a button to start the film. "Fine, but only because my whole body hurts from sitting on the floor studying all weekend."

"Do you always say 'we' when it's just *you*?" I asked as the opening credits played.

"Nah, she was waiting for me," Mouse chirped, dropping two pizzas and a small stack of napkins on the coffee table before settling on a floor pillow. "At least she was *supposed* to be," she complained with an exaggerated pout towards our roommate.

"You've seen it before." The topsider shrugged.

I had as well. It was an older movie, not quite a classic in the definitive sense, but with a cult-like following. It was no surprise it was as popular here as it was topside, given the bleach-blonde villain could easily be a demoness herself.

Actually, now that I thought about it, she kind of reminded me of Frenchie.

Mouse flicked a pizza box open, sliding a couple slices onto a paper plate and handing them to the topsider.

She offered the plate to me. "Are you hungry?"

I grinned before I could stop myself. A real, honest smile. Not the fake bullshit I put on with everyone else. It had been a really, really long time

since anyone had offered me anything that didn't involve a contract. "Starved."

Our fingers brushed as she handed me the plate, and she shivered, swinging her legs off my lap to sit up and collect her own plate.

Halfway through the movie, we'd eaten the first pizza and most of the second; the new girl grabbed us sodas right before the big Halloween party scene. When she returned, flopping back down on the cushion beside me, I hooked a hand under her knee, bringing her legs to rest across mine.

I'd... liked it. It was nice to touch for the sake of touching and not because she was trying to get me to fall into bed with her as someone else.

I turned my mostly empty soda can in my hands, trying to keep them busy.

"What should my screen name be?" the new girl mused aloud, waving her phone in the air.

Mouse leaned her head back against the topsider's stomach where she stretched on the loveseat.

"Did you have a nickname when you were alive?"

"Nonna used to call me Olive."

"Nonna?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"My grandmother."

Mouse laughed. "I guess it'll do until they name you. We were all '*topsider*' for a while. Well... the humans at least." She grinned at me upside down, her soft afro framing her face in a cloud of dreamy ebony.

"And you got Mouse *because*?" our roommate asked, drawing the last word into a song.

"Poison decided I was too quiet," she scoffed. "I think they just like the sound of their own voice."

"You would be right about that," I snarked, leaning forward to place the soda can on the table.

"Why do they call you Poison?" the topsider asked, eyes bright and curious where they studied my face.

I grinned, the picture of confidence even as my insides squirmed. "Because your first taste will be your last."

Mouse's lips curved into a teasing smile, shooting her friend a surreptitious wink.

"That so?" she challenged, raising a dark eyebrow.

“Come on, baby, I know you want me,” I teased, more breathlessly than intended.

She seemed to consider this for a moment, unaware of how I hung off her every breath as I waited for her reply.

“I’d want anyone who would curl up and watch movies with me after the week I’ve had.” She laughed, her eyes returning to her phone. “Olive it is, for now, I guess.”

“Olive,” I tasted the name on my tongue, drawing out the syllables to savour it. Short, sweet, and to the point. It suited her.

“Where were you yesterday?”

My lips curled as my heart beat harder. “Why? Did you miss me?”

“You wish. I’m curious what a demon does on their days off.”

Mouse’s eyes were trained on the screen, though I was sure her ears were focused on our conversation. It was the truth that I’d named her because of her penchant for quiet contemplation—though maybe those days were behind her now that she’d taken to Olive so quickly—but she easily could have been dubbed *Rat* as a nod to all of the information she brokered.

“Studied a little,” I admitted. “I hide out in the library when I’m tired.”

Olive’s lips parted in surprise. “Sorry, but you don’t seem like the studious type.”

I frowned, tracing small circles against her leg with the pad of my thumb. “I don’t?”

“They’re rank five,” Mouse cut in.

“Five?” Olive choked. “Holy shit.”

“You haven’t checked?” I asked incredulously.

“Not to be a self-centred asshole, but I’ve been a bit busy with—y’know—worrying about my own rank.”

“And catching up on a week’s worth of lessons,” Mouse said.

“Fair enough,” I replied.

I didn’t have the guts to tell her how I’d earned that spot, though she was smart enough to figure it out anyway. Not when Olive was treating me like a... friend. I looked away from her curious eyes and back to the TV.

It wasn’t that I was ashamed of my actions. I was a shapeshifter, the progeny of two pleasure demons—an incubus and a succubus—though I’d shirked the title I’d been given at birth a long time ago, choosing a gender-

neutral option that made me more comfortable. Regardless of what I called myself, for demons like me, sex was what we *did*. But, over the last few years, I'd grown tired of the box that my classification had trapped me in. I wanted more than an easy lay in exchange for rank points.

I wanted to be seen as a demon first, fuckable later.

Suddenly I was craving a smoke, the familiar itch of disappointment unsettling.

Olive sat up suddenly, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"This thing can take pictures!" she announced, waving her phone like it was a miracle the device could perform basic features. She squished herself against my side, the camera flipped so it was facing us.

"Smile!" she demanded, her own grin filling the screen.

I obliged, smiling too wide for my face. She turned her head at the last minute, licking a stripe up my cheek before she snapped the shutter, capturing the silly moment between us.

"Why—?" I didn't finish asking the question before she cut me off.

"How often do you get a taste of Poison?" Olive winked.

My cheeks heated. *Me*. Poison. A demon who'd spent the last several hours before this on the pussy parade.

"As often as you'd like, precious," I promised, barely recognizing the wistful sound of my own voice.

She settled back against her arm of the couch, fingers tapping over her phone screen.

"Okay, I remember Wrath said I just needed to put in your name and—Yes!"

A few moments later, my phone buzzed. I checked the screen to find she'd sent me a copy of the image.

Warmth pooled in my belly as I looked at the glittering humour in her eyes, the desire for a cigarette disappearing in a puff of smoke.

Humour. Not lust. Not desire, need, or any of the other things I was used to seeing in the gaze of others. Pure, unfiltered joy.

Fun.

"Hey!" Mouse pouted. "What about me?"

"What, did you want a taste of them, too?"

She howled with laughter. "As if."

"Then shut up!" Olive nudged her bare foot against Mouse's shoulder before settling her legs back in my lap.

I circled my hand slowly around Olive's ankle, tracing patterns against her skin.

For the first time, I felt like I really belonged with the group. Like I wasn't just a convenient accessory.

Sure, I'd hung out with Mouse a bit, but we'd really only studied. But this? Olive had sought me out. Invited me in.

It made me feel... normal.

Like I'd made my very first friend.

OLIVIA

SEVEN

Voices spilled into the hall as we wandered towards the smell of bacon; Mouse's pace unhurried as she tapped away at her phone screen. I was quickly getting used to having conversations with minimal eye contact, even if it meant I had to repeat myself often.

"You know, maybe the whole '*no deals for a week*' thing isn't so bad," she reasoned, scrolling to the class ranks to find my name—or lack thereof.

Though I'd finally given myself a screen name on Coffin Messenger, it didn't change that I was still a blank line on the rank board.

Being called topsider by everyone but the two friends I'd managed to make since my arrival was annoying the hell out of me. I had a name for fucksakes!

I brushed my fingers over the silvery 'X' shaped pin I'd fastened to the lapel of my jacket. It arrived last night along with a letter detailing that I wasn't able to make any deals for my first seven days as a student.

Just what I needed, another way for people to pick out that I was *the* new girl.

The tables were full to bursting with students as we made our way through the crowded room, my nose wrinkling. "Every second I'm not making a deal is another second that I am not climbing the class ranks. I only have a couple of months before the winter brea—"

Mouse sighed loudly, her irritation bubbling up. We'd been having variations of this conversation since the letter arrived yesterday after the movie. "Dude, chill. You already climbed, like, a hundred ranks this weekend."

“So, what? I’m supposed to rely on other people’s bad decisions to pave my way?”

The idea made my skin crawl. I needed to be in control of my own life. *Afterlife*. Whatever.

“I’ll grab us some coffee and meet you at a table,” my roommate huffed with a wave, headed for the busy drink station.

“Don’t worry, I’ll pick you up a bagel or something,” I called after her, feeling a little bad.

This weekend there was a lot of ‘*me*’ talk. Which was a little warranted, given I’d just *died*. But I needed to make more of an effort with her if I wanted our friendship to stick.

“My hero,” Mouse cooed, batting her eyelashes at me mockingly over her shoulder.

I knew I was annoying her with my constant worrying about ranks and being behind—but come on! This was my whole *Afterlife*! If I had to spend the rest of it being tortured because I couldn’t figure out how to make a few smartly worded bets, I’d be eternally pissed.

Come on, Olivia! Pull yourself together. You’re the best runner in the tri-state area! You made your first big turf takeover at fifteen. This is basically a game! Child’s play!

I forced all the swagger and bravado I could into my steps, straightening my spine and sauntering towards the pastry case. I needed to present as unbothered, prepared. Not like I was a goldfish dropped into the shark’s tank, secretly grateful that I wasn’t able to make a deal until Friday at the earliest. I had a feeling that if my classmates sniffed out my rising anxiety, it would be my blood in the water.

Besides, this wasn’t my first rodeo. I was practically raised to deal with these people. How many of the other students grew up spending their evenings and weekends learning about the finer points of the drug trade? How to file serial numbers off of guns?

Ignoring the eyes burning a hole in my back, I elbowed through a group of students lingering in front of the baked goods to find my goal blocked by a set of broad shoulders. I grabbed a tray and a couple of plates, setting them onto the metal grate and sliding the tray down with an audible rattle.

The seconds ticked by, the wall of muscle to my right sighing loudly.

I guessed he was a demon, mostly from his size. He had to be as big as Dice. And that guy? Yeah, he was built like a fucking truck. His uniform jacket pulled so tautly over his shoulders that it looked like the material was likely to rip in half.

A mess of shaggy, lightly curled, white-blond hair sat atop his head, contrasting beautifully with his golden skin. A strong jaw and defined nose made up the rest of his delicious profile, leaving my skin feeling hot.

Gorgeous, my brain supplied like I didn't have fucking eyes.

I cleared my throat and he started, seeming to realise where he was. "Do you mind handing me a raspberry danish?"

"Sure," he replied in a deep baritone that I felt down to my toes. He collected my breakfast with the metal tongs, turning to set it on my plate. "Oh," he gasped, lips parting in surprise.

I scowled. Great, another asshole to gawk at the fucking topsider. If I could meet one person who didn't see me as the new girl it would be a relief. I opened my mouth, my inner New Jersian roaring to the surface and begging that I give him a verbal dressing down only to find my wit dead on my tongue.

He looked down at me, towering at least a foot over my very reasonable 5'4", icy blue eyes wide as he studied me from head to toe, like he couldn't believe I was here.

There was something familiar about him. I just couldn't place his face. And fuck, if I'd seen this guy before I'd *remember*—It was impossible. Everything about him practically oozed demonic energy. No human was that big. That beautifully sculpted. That... perfect.

It was like he couldn't quite keep his glamour in place, his skin shifting from golden to ashen grey as he stumbled backwards, knocking into a passing student and smashing their tray to the floor.

"Sorry," he muttered, ignoring the curses of the reedy co-ed.

In the scuffle, I noticed the pin stuck to the front of his blazer. "You're the other late registrant?"

He nodded slowly, his lips pressing together in a thin line.

I tapped my own pin. "Me too, want to sit with me? Might help to have a friend who's also on the no-fly list."

"No-fly list?" he rumbled, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, you know, like—actually you wouldn't." I laughed, but it was too high in my ears. Since when did I get nervous talking to guys? "Since

we uh, can't make deals. I mean."

"Sure," the giant grunted. "I'm Saint." He wrinkled his nose in disgust, like his name was offensive to his ears.

"Funny," I commented, grabbing a bagel for Mouse and leading my new companion towards the table she'd found for us.

"Is it?"

"A demon named Saint, I'd say it's ironic at least."

He breathed a laugh. "I suppose so. Have they named you yet?"

"No," I spat, dropping the tray down harder than I meant to in my frustration.

"Don't bring up the name thing," mock-whispered Mouse. "It's kind of a sore spot."

I rolled my eyes, taking up the seat across from my roommate before claiming a bite of my danish. "Whatever. Saint, this is Mouse."

Mouse looked across the table with interest, her dark eyes flicking to the pin on the lapel of Saint's jacket. "You're the other newbie, huh?"

"Yup," I answered for him, taking a sip of my coffee. "What do you think of the school so far?"

He shrugged a shoulder, picking at the paper of his bran muffin. "It's Hell."

"Isn't that the truth, you wouldn't believe—"

I lost track of my words as Dice, Riot and Wrath entered, flanked on either side by students I didn't recognise. Well, except for Frenchie. But who could forget watching someone orgasm minutes after your own murder? I hadn't seen any of them since my first day, save for Riot when I left this morning—still snoring despite her righted nose.

Dice flashed a grin that was all weaponized charm as he spotted me, waving and making a move to come over. Before he made it more than two steps, Wrath grabbed his arm, tugging him back with a low comment in the demon's ear that made them both laugh.

They might be laughing, but it pissed me off.

I thought this was a fucking *university* not a high school.

"Why does the Prince's second-in-command know who you are?" asked Saint with a furrowed brow.

I choked on my coffee. "The—*Who*?"

Mouse snorted a laugh. "He means Dice. Some people call Wrath 'the prince'."

I hid my mouth with my hand, covering my laugh with a cough. “What is this? An anime?”

“No, he's the second son of Lucifer.” Mouse raised an eyebrow at me like this was common knowledge.

I blinked.

Sure, in the elevator he'd said as much, but I hadn't taken him seriously. I'd thought he was trying to y'know... get into my panties. He seemed like your usual too rich to care, self-assured, dudebro asshole. Like he was posturing to try to get me to agree to an easy lay.

When I looked over my shoulder, it was to find Wrath sitting at the sunken circular table in the middle of the room, his eyes fixed on me. I could feel his stare like a warm hand against my skin, coaxing colour into my cheeks.

Inexplicably, I felt the desire to go over there and settle myself right into his lap.

“Is it just me, or does he not like you?” Mouse asked, looking between the two of us.

Saint tensed, our dishes rattling on the table as his fist hit the tabletop. “He's bad news.”

“A prince of Hell who's a dickhead. How original,” I scoffed, returning to my breakfast and finding my appetite had disappeared.

Dice shot me a wink as he walked by, his tray overflowing with plates. He settled beside Wrath, the two of them falling into easy conversation as Dice slid a bowl of tragically boring-looking oatmeal in front of the golden-haired demon.

Wrath's eyes slid from my skin and it was like a spell had broken, the strange pull to him severed. I gave myself a little shake.

Seriously, what the fuck was going on with me? It hadn't been that long since I'd been laid. There was no reason for my libido to be so out of control around a few—albeit stupidly hot—classmates.

Classmates, I reminded myself with a grimace, *who were demons*.

Somehow, I was less bothered by that fact than I should have been.

Poison thumped down on my free side, pulling my cup of half-drunk coffee to their lips with a hum of appreciation. Their uniform was deliciously rumpled as ever, a purple bruise peeking out of their collar. “Morning, precious.”

I grinned. “Hey, where were you this morning? You were already gone before I woke up.”

“The gym,” they replied, almost too quickly. “Are you done with that?”

I slid the tray with my half-eaten danish towards them and they shoved it into their mouth. “Fanks, vos teh bug buoy?” Their words were muffled with pastry, but a nod towards Saint filled in the blanks.

“The other late registrant. Table manners, dude.” Mouse said in disgust.

Poison swallowed hard and finished off my coffee. “Sorry.”

“Poison, Saint. Saint, Poison,” I supplied.

Saint nodded to the shapeshifter uneasily. “Hey.”

“Fuck, you’re a big one. I can’t believe they found a uniform to go over those shoulders.”

“Down doggy,” I teased and Poison wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me to their side.

“Jealous?”

“In your wildest drea—”

Our conversation was cut short as noise erupted from the centre table, drawing our group’s focus. Dice was leaning back in his seat, one leg kicked over his knee like he had the biggest cock in the room. Judging by his size... maybe only Saint would be in competition.

“You cheated!” roared a red-faced boy, running his hands over his closely cropped chestnut hair. “I demand a rematch!”

“Do you have anything to offer?” drawled Dice, picking his nails. “What rank are you now anyway, Greenie?”

Greenie opened and closed his mouth a few times, his fists clenching at his sides and making the tattoos on his knuckles jump.

“I’ll tell you what,” drawled Wrath. “If you can beat me at a game of rock, paper, scissors—best two out of three—I’ll give you the points you need to get back to your original spot.”

Riot twirled a piece of dark hair around her finger, an uneasy look on her face as she glanced at Wrath.

“Rock, paper, scissors? What is this, kindergarten?” I asked quietly, the rest of the room was stone silent—save for the sound of hands meeting hands. I guessed that people were already betting on the outcome of the contest.

“Not the way he plays,” murmured Poison, their voice foreboding. Greenie paled, drawing his lip between his gapped front teeth.

“What?” Wrath purred, voice low and deadly. “I think it’s a perfectly fair deal.”

“F-fine.” Greenie offered his hand to Wrath who stood, taking it immediately.

“The best of three in a simple game of rock, paper, scissors, using the same hands used to make the deal, will receive in the case of the challenger—” he paused and Greenie picked up where he left off.

“Enough rank points to return me to rank nine hundred and eighty-seven. And in the case of the challengee—”

“A twenty percent cut of everything you grow from now until graduation.”

“Wait, what? That isn’t equivalent—” Greenie gasped, his dark brows coming together as sweat dewed along his temple.

“Scared you’ll lose?” Dice snickered. “Not like he can cheat, the Code of Ethics and all that.”

“N-no.” He shook their hands once, twice. “I agree to the terms.”

Wrath’s casual, blank face twisted with glee, green eyes practically glowing with excitement. “Excellent.”

Greenie screamed with pain, his knees buckling under him. A mix of laughter and gasps spread through the room as Greenie howled on the ground, Wrath having finally released his mangled hand.

“You’re a fucking demon!” Greenie shouted, cradling his fingers where they stuck out at odd angles.

“Oh, Jesus,” muttered Mouse in disgust, her phone angled towards the pair.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Wrath replied lazily, cracking his knuckles. “Shall we get on with it?”

“I can’t watch this.” Saint stood, abandoning his untouched muffin. “I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah,” I replied numbly, my eyes glued to Greenie’s broken hand. “I thought—I thought they couldn’t cheat.”

“The deal doesn’t come into effect until you release hands,” Poison replied with a wince. “Greenie was too thrown off by what Wrath wanted if he won, he didn’t pay attention to the terms.”

The gravity of my situation pressed on me like a load of bricks. I wasn't the only student looking to fix the odds.

Maybe I was going to have to cheat after all.

POISON WALKED ME TO CLASS, leaving me at the door with a quick kiss on the cheek that left my skin tingling.

They were... charming.

But—like I'd seen with Wrath—charming didn't mean harmless. And I wasn't sure how much risk was associated with our friendship yet. On Sunday, watching them walk through the common room they'd just seemed so... lonely. Like a cloud was hanging over their shoulders. I'd been impulsive in asking them to join Mouse and me, despite how much fun we'd ended up having together.

I watched as Poison turned the corner, pausing only to flash me a quick thumbs up.

With a sigh, I squared my shoulders. Mouse had told me this class was for humans only, so this was my big opportunity to try and make some allies outside of my roommates.

My eyes snagged on Riot and Saint sitting in the front row and I cleared my throat, seeking out a free seat that wasn't between my crazy roommate and the only other newbie in the room.

I froze, my hands fisting at my sides on reflex.

There, at the back of the room, with his copper hair flaming and his eyes wide—not with surprise from the last fleeting moments of his troubled life, but with anger—sat Kallum. He clenched his fist on the desk, his knuckles shining white as his lips quirked into a smile that was more of a grimace.

In another life, the look on his face would've excited me. It was usually followed by the pair of us being horizontal on the closest flat surface, my hands in Kallum's hair while he fucked our most recent fight right out of me.

The memories soured like milk, heavy in my stomach and threatening to pull up the meagre breakfast I'd managed to force down.

I couldn't move, couldn't breathe. My palms suddenly felt slick. Whether with the phantom feeling of his blood as I fed chunks of his thawing corpse to the pigs at a farm upstate or in sweat, I wasn't keen to find out.

His accusing stare pinned me in place.

Furious.

Scathing.

It melted the skin off my bones and turned me to ash where I stood, drifting aimlessly in the stale air of the second-story lecture hall.

Because when you drown your boyfriend in a trough of horse water with your two closest relatives, you never expect to have to explain *why*.

Though he should know. It's not like I wouldn't have figured out he was colluding with the fucking *Feds* eventually. Bastardo.

Kallum looked like he was two seconds away from completely losing his cool and attacking me, standing from his seat slowly, his lips parted and shoulders bunching up to his ears. That was until Saint whistled loudly, calling my attention like a gunshot. He waved a hand, motioning for me to sit between him and Riot, a wary eye on Kallum.

I bit the inside of my cheek, my fight or flight response begging me to turn and sprint out of here as fast as I fucking could.

My fingers touched the cool metal of the pin on my lapel.

Not for the first time, I missed the comforting weight of my gun.

Because there wasn't a single person, dead or alive, I wanted to see less than the man who was marching toward me down the centre aisle with malice colouring his features.

Finding my footing, I stumbled back as he came to a stop in front of me. Kallum's meaty fist closed around the collar of my crisp, white button-down and yanked me towards him, my toes barely catching on the tiles as I choked around the fabric.

Fuck.

It was funny how four inches seemed like a whole lot more when they were held by a guy who had a hundred pounds on you.

"*Baby*, fancy seeing you here," he seethed, giving me a rough shake that stole the air from my lungs.

The sound of idle chatter died away, replaced by flesh meeting flesh as deals were struck around the room. Likely betting on everything from whether or not I'd cry to if and when a teacher would break us up.

I gathered all the moisture in my mouth that I could and spat directly into Kallum O'Brian's stupid, lying face.

"Get your fucking hands off me, *rat*."

Kallum's reply was lost as a handful of thin, spindly fingers enveloped his wrist hard enough to fracture the bones with a sickening crunch that reminded me of the way the saw struggled to cut through his femur.

I gasped, relishing in the rush of air to my lungs as I was dropped back to my feet.

"Lucky, back to your seat. This isn't the Prey field," purred a tall demon with glowing yellow eyes that seemed to flicker between molten gold and hellfire. "You too, topsider."

I didn't have to be told twice. I threw myself into the closest open spot, breathing a sigh of relief when Saint nudged me sharply with his elbow.

"Are you alright?" he asked as the professor wrote on the board with a practiced hand.

I didn't have time to reply before he was speaking.

"Good morning. As you are well aware, my name is Professor Brim." He turned, smoothing those long spindly fingers down the front of his finely pressed suit. "Though, I imagine if you couldn't manage to remember that I do not allow wagers within this room, it bears repeating."

Something about the bored, cool tone of his voice reminded me of Scar from the Lion King; a movie Wes had only made me watch a million times when we were kids. How fucked up is that? Dude watches his parents die and then forms an attachment to Simba.

I hoped he was still going to therapy without me there to bully him into it.

Brim's eerie yellow eyes looked from me to Kallum and a sneering smile graced his lips, revealing pointed teeth. "One might consider, if they are already re-taking my class due to failure to comply with my rules, that they might be on better behaviour this semester."

Kallum scoffed, raising the hair on the back of my neck. From where I was sitting my back was mostly to him. It left me feeling exposed.

On my right, Riot was leaning away from me, looking straight ahead at the board.

Saint nudged my elbow gently, showing me his hastily scribbled note on the screen of his tablet.

Ignore him.

I took out my own stylus and tablet, penning my reply.

Easier said than done.

“Today’s lesson will expand on what we learned last week. Eagle-eyed students may have noticed a distinct lack of *diversity* at the University.” Brim’s eyes flicked to Saint, displeasure turning his lips down. “You, *Saint*,” he practically spat the name. “Why don’t you tell me why that is?” Brim leaned against his desk, the picture of manufactured patience.

Predator. The word fit the eerie creature, not quite monster, not quite man, with surprising accuracy.

“Well?” Professor Brim prompted.

Saint cleared his throat. “Because there are multiple afterlives.”

“Very good,” he flashed a brief smile that didn’t meet his eyes. “The Underworld—sometimes referred to as Hell—is only one in a long line of options for what could have happened when your heart stopped beating. How fun that your beliefs in life manifested such an interesting afterlife.”

I bit my lip. I guess I’d been a better devotee than I thought.

If that was the case, where the fuck was Ricky? He was twice the parishioner I ever was. Maybe he was able to repent and skipped this circus altogether.

“I’d like to see some hands. Who read Dante’s *Inferno* while they were still living?”

The name of the book was familiar to me, but the only classics I read were assigned in my classes.

A few hands raised around us and the professor scoffed. “Forget all of that. He was an idiot.”

I started scribbling notes as he went on, hoping for some hints on how to navigate the nightmare I’d been dumped into. My knee bounced under the desk, trying to burn off the adrenaline still coursing through me from the revelation that my very murdered ex-boyfriend was my new *classmate*.

“Hell is built up of districts, not circles. Though you may hear some mention circles when discussing the hierarchy of different demon classifications. Each of our districts has a speciality and not all of them house the facilities that we use on the mortals unfortunate to end up here. Hands again, who has seen the popular Pixar animated film *Monsters Incorporated*?”

I raised my hand timidly, along with most of my classmates.

“Good. Hell’s energy infrastructure runs off human suffering. Very similar to the way that Monstropolis harnesses children’s screams. The main difference is the means we use to harvest that energy.”

A haughty laugh from behind me had me swivelling in my seat.

“You want to tell me that Hell—big bad, *burn for all eternity Hell*—uses human screams as a power source?” sneered a tanned girl with a wide jaw, her dark eyebrow raised.

“There are many ways to make you suffer that do not involve screaming, Viper. Interrupt my lesson again and I’d be happy to demonstrate for the class.”

Her warm skin went ashen as she sank back into her chair.

Brim clapped his hands together like she hadn’t spoken at all. “The same field of magic that is tuned to create contracts for your deals within the grounds is tuned to collect mortal suffering beyond our borders. This isn’t the case for all nine of the districts, which leads me to your first homework assignment for the semester. Using the assigned readings and the textbook, you and a partner will need to complete a fifteen-minute oral presentation as your midterm for this class. The presentation should provide an in-depth review of one of the nine districts of Hell. I will allow you to choose your own partners, but the districts will be assigned at random.”

There was a lot of shuffling as the class picked partners, my eyes shot between Riot and Saint, both of them making a great effort to ignore me completely.

“Umm...” I hesitated, looking between the pair.

“Saint, One Thousand Eight Hundred and Seventy-Two,” Brim called, breaking the weird contest of wills I’d found myself in the middle of. “If you could pair with each other, please. It wouldn’t be fair to the other students to give them a partner who is behind in their studies.”

“Yeah, fair,” muttered Saint, frowning.

“Come on, I don’t bite,” I teased.

Riot snorted beside me and my eyes flicked to her.

“You have something to say?”

“No,” she hedged, not meeting my eye. “I need to find a partner.” She stood, pushing her chair in so roughly it clattered against the desk.

Saint turned my way with a guilty smile. “Nothing against you, I, uh... don’t work well in groups.”

“Sure,” I shrugged. “I thought only humans had to take this class?”

“I’m a transfer student, so they thought it pertinent to add to my course load.”

Something in the way that Saint didn’t meet my eye made me think he wasn’t being totally honest. Before I had time to investigate my concerns, the bell rang.

Whatever. I didn’t have time to worry about Saint and his weirdness, not when Kallum O’Brian was making a beeline for me through the chairs blocking his way. I shoved my tablet into my bag and hopped over my desk, all but sprinting for the door without another look behind me.

I didn’t know fuck all about how to deal with my class rank or the group project with my reluctant acquaintance. But I knew one thing for sure; I needed to figure out a way to deal with my ex-boyfriend, or I needed a shield to do it for me.

OLIVIA

EIGHT

I was practically swimming in the uncomfortable fabric of my thin polyester jersey. The hem of the top resting just above the maroon trim of my shorts as I made my way out of the changing rooms and onto the side of the field where the rest of the class was relaxing in the grass.

I'd assumed that gym would be held in the Azazel Athletics Centre around the corner from my dorm, but the cute flashing icon of a spider had other ideas when I checked my digitised map. Instead, I found myself standing on the pitch of a stadium tucked in the back of campus.

Thank fuck for GPS; turns out it was useful for more than checking for speed traps.

On either side of a football-sized field were copses of closely grown trees, their slender trunks reaching for the sky through the dome's open ceiling. Rows and rows of sloped seating wrapped around the walls—which meant whatever they did here garnered one hell of an audience.

On the way inside, I'd almost been disappointed that the half-mile-long building had a modest glassed-in entryway and modern, if not plain, locker rooms and showers. But now, standing and gaping at the tiny biome within its walls, I had to admit I was a little impressed. I'd been to a few football games when I was alive, but even an NFL stadium seemed small in comparison to the behemoth I was standing in.

I spotted Mouse and Poison right away, the pair of them watching a video on Mouse's phone as I made my way towards them. Mouse's face broke into a relieved, slightly wavering, smile as I approached. Poison waved, close by as they waited for me at the fringes of the class.

"Topsider! Wait up!" Dice called, jogging to catch up.

Somehow, in the weekend since I'd last seen him, I'd managed to completely forget about his size. Dice towered over me by at least a foot, his cheeks rosy from the chilly fall breeze. The long top section of his hair was tied loosely into a ponytail that created an adorable little floof at the back of his head.

Not that I found anything about Dice adorable.

"That's not my name," I said coolly, continuing my path toward my friends.

So what if I swayed my hips a little extra as I stomped across the grass?

Dice's hand caught my wrist, turning me to face him with a gentle tug. "Hey! Wait a second! I wanted to ask if you'd had your first deal yet."

"My first deal?" I asked incredulously. "Is that supposed to be an innuendo? Because it's a piss poo—"

"It isn't," he said earnestly. "You seemed pretty stressed Friday so I just —"

"What? What's it to you?" I narrowed my eyes and he shifted.

"Honestly? Nothing. You seem like you could use someone on your team."

He was right about that.

My eyes flicked to where his fingers overlapped on my skin. "So what, you want to help?"

"Maybe, if you aren't going to bite my head off." He grinned lopsidedly, revealing a surprise dimple in his left cheek.

"I'll think about it," I hedged, looking away before I could be accused of staring.

It wasn't like I could turn my nose up at some help right now. But, I wasn't so stupid as to agree to a contract without reading the fine print.

Something told me that Dice didn't do *anything* unless there was something in it for him. What that was, I'd need to figure out.

He tilted his head, showing off his well-maintained undercut. "You should."

Sunlight cascaded over his warm, tan skin giving the effect that he glowed from within, his deep violet eyes earnest where they landed on my face.

"Yo, Dice!" called a stocky, round-faced man with hands the size of hams. "We need to talk."

I brushed the demon off, my cheeks pinking as I turned quickly to jog the rest of the way to my friends.

“Are you okay?” Mouse asked in a low voice just as Poison said, “You’re so popular, precious.”

“I’m good, how was first per—”

“If you think for one second I’m going to let you get away with that you’re delusional! The video is everywhere!” Mouse snapped, brandishing her phone at me like a sword.

I swallowed a frustrated sigh. Of course, my little stand-off with Kallum would be common knowledge by now. Mouse’d told me all about the information brokers, students who made their ranks by trading in information to the highest bidder.

Students like my friend, her full bottom lip pulled between her teeth while her brain did laps.

Nothing was off-limits to be traded. And with a scene as public as Kallum had made? The information would have been worthless—which meant it would spread like wildfire.

If everybody already knows, there’s no harm in spreading it.

Poison frowned, their arms crossing over their chest. “Are you hurt?”

“No! No, Kal—Lucky,” I corrected quickly, with a roll of my eyes. “Jesus, where do I even start? We knew each other, back in Jersey. Let’s just say he has a reason to hold a grudge.”

Poison glared at me, their face uncharacteristically serious. “How much of a reason?”

“Did he ever say how he died?”

“Murdered by his ‘crazy bitch of an ex-girlfriend’,” Mouse rattled off. “He didn’t mean—”

“Me?” My laugh was bitter, frustrated. “Sure did. Did he also tell you that he was colluding with the FBI to build a case against my family?”

“What does your family have to do with it?” Poison asked, looking over my head towards the changing rooms. They stiffened, drawing me closer to their side. “What the fuck? Isn’t that guy supposed to be a second-year?”

“Who?” I asked, trying to ignore the way my core heated at having Poison’s hand on my lower back.

“Lucky,” Mouse hissed.

My stomach dipped uncomfortably. I leaned against Poison, trying to keep my body language loose and unbothered.

If Kallum was going to openly declare war on me, it wouldn't hurt to look like I had backup that was bigger and meaner than him.

I put all the interest into my face that I could muster, batting my eyelashes up at my friend.

Poison wasn't particularly frightening with their glossy black hair and gentle eyes. Really, they were way too *pretty* to be considered *scary*. But they were a *demon*. One of The Ten. Maybe Kallum would try and avoid a physical fight if it was clear I was busy.

"If it's based on when he died then, yes. The day I died was a year and three months after I killed him."

"What are you doing?" Poison asked quietly, their hands finding my waist.

A miracle, given the size of my shirt.

"Putting on a show," Mouse snorted, picking up my angle quickly. "And no, he left the bit about him colluding with the Feds out. Shocker."

"Topsider," chided Dice as he caught up. "We weren't done talking." His hand found my waist, tugging me out of Poison's hold and flush against his thick chest. "Don't tell me you're wasting your time with the campus courtesan. If you're lonely, I'd be happy to give you some company." His suggestive smile would have been certifiably panty-melting if it wasn't for the fact that his comment royally pissed me off.

Who the fuck did this demon think he was?

"Don't call them that," I hissed, shoving him as hard as I could.

He didn't even flinch, which only made me angrier. I brought my knee up in a vicious strike to his manhood, stepping out of his hold as he grunted and cupped his balls.

"Poison is my friend, asshole. Insult them again, and I'll do a lot more than bruise your *ego*."

Poison's grin was luminous, their pale cheeks painted a rosy pink. "Yeah, we're *friends*."

Dice scoffed, though it sounded more like a wheeze. "Fine, whenever you're done slumming it—you know where to find me. My offer still stands."

"Sure do," I replied primly. Then, remembering this morning, I added, "wedged between Wrath's asscheeks, right?"

Dice's cheeks darkened. "Watch it, topsider. I think you're hot, but that pretty little mouth of yours will get you into some serious trouble."

"I'm so scared. See you later, dipshit," I mocked, taking Poison's hand and tugging them towards where the professor was waiting with a silver whistle between his pursed lips.

"It's Dice!" he snapped incredulously.

Mouse snorted a laugh, looping her arm with mine and calling over her shoulder. "Regroup, man. Maybe the next time you wanna flirt with a girl don't start by negging her friends."

"Thank you," Poison murmured at the same time I said, "I'm sorry."

"What do you have to be sorry about?"

"He wouldn't have said any of that stuff to you if I—"

"No. He would have," interrupted Mouse. "Poison has a..." she winced apologetically and continued, "bit of a reputation around campus."

Poison looked away, their jaw tight. "This is the part where you drop me, right?"

I looked between them, my brows pulling together in confusion. It didn't make any difference to me how Poison kept their rank or how they earned it. Though I'd never dabbled in sex work myself, I'd rubbed elbows with enough working girls to know how hard the job was.

"Why would I do that? I don't care what you do in your free time."

"Right," they muttered, their shoulders slumped and curving inwards as if they were preparing for impact.

I shook Mouse off, stopping abruptly in Poison's path. They refused to meet my eye, gaze fixed on the ground at their feet.

"Hey," I coaxed, tucking my fingers under their strong jaw and tilting their eyes to meet mine. "I like hanging out with you. Do you like hanging out with me?"

"Yes," they breathed, the corner of their mouth tilting upwards. "Of course I do."

The stormy ocean of their gaze brightened a bit, taking us out of hurricane territory, but it wasn't nearly enough for me. A second ago, the air between us had been so peaceful. Our friendship had been easy up to this point, and I wasn't going to let insecurity stand in the way of that.

"Then let's keep hanging out."

"But—"

“Poison,” I interrupted, putting a finger against their lips. “There is *nothing* shameful about being a sex worker. Some of the nicest girls I knew were escorts. Smart as fuck too, always had the best gossip and makeup tips.”

“Not sure how good at makeup I’d be,” they teased, their breath warm against my skin.

“I’m willing to let you try anyway.”

Poison smiled and collected my hand in both of theirs, kissing my fingers. “Okay,”

I bit my lip to suppress the flirty smile that was threatening to overtake my features.

“Not that this isn’t adorable,” chided Mouse, “but you’re drawing an audience.”

My cheeks burned.

The shrill sound of the whistle pierced the air, effectively ending our conversation.

“Students!” called a stocky man with a dirty, pornstar moustache and socks pulled way too close to his knees. “Today we will be having a friendly game of prey. Who’s played before?”

Unsurprisingly, most of the demonic classmates raised their hands. I looked at Mouse who shrugged, clearly as in the dark as I was.

“I’ve invited two members of our school team to help with the class today. This is Lucky.” The professor motioned to Kallum and he grinned, his gaze sweeping the class and landing on me. The only sign of his lingering anger was the tightening around his eyes.

I fought the urge to bare my teeth at him like an animal, my fingers twitching for a gun that I didn’t have.

Fuck him for being angry at me when he was the one looking to stab me in the back.

“And this is Guts.” The professor motioned to the giant on his other side, his locs pulled into a knot on the top of his head. Guts stretched, hand curling around his elbow as he raised one of his tree trunk-like arms above his head. “Take it away boys!”

Guts reminded me of Luca, a runner that Gio used when I was too busy to take on a job. He was good at what he did, but jumpy. Worked way too hard at feigning the easy confidence that made you blend into a crowd.

“We’re going to split you into two teams,” he called. “We don’t quite have enough students to play two full matches, so Lucky and I will fill in spaces where we need to. There are seven players—plus alternates of course—on a prey team.” Guts crossed his arms over his chest, the veins in his biceps seeming to pulse and wriggle like snakes. “There are three positions on the team. Runner, safeguard and chaser. Safeguards are defence, chasers are offence, and runners score the points.”

“Each team will have two runners,” Kallum took over, yanking one of the fluttering flags out of the dirt in the middle of the pitch. “It’s up to the runner to grab a flag and get to the opposite side of the field—through the other team, obviously. Past those trees is a clearing with a painted box in its centre. Get the flag in the box and you score a point. First team to three wins. The safeguards attempt to stop the runners and the chasers try to block the safeguards. Any questions?” He waited patiently, his eyes sweeping the group and finding mine once more, the arrogant edge to his smile that had me shifting forward before I’d thought to move.

Mouse grabbed my arm, setting herself between Poison and I with a look that said ‘*don’t*’.

When no one raised their hands Kallum clapped his own together, rubbing his palms together like the greedy little rat he was. “Great, Guts will break you into teams—it’ll be your call what positions you play. Then we can get started with the first game.”

Guts moved around the class, disbursing neon yellow armbands to every other person.

Poison whooped as they pulled the stretchy material over their elbow. “Alright, precious! Same team!”

“Typical,” Mouse groaned, moving to the far side of the field where the armbandless students were waiting.

I followed Poison as they made their way over to the yellow team, pulling on my marker and walking towards Wrath and Riot.

Of fucking course.

It was like God was playing some kind of cruel trick on me—I couldn’t escape The Ten no matter where I was. My room. The dining hall. My classes. I’d think it was funny if Riot didn’t practically vibrate with anger every time she saw me. Or if Wrath’s lips didn’t press into a thin line of irritation. I didn’t know what I could have done to earn that kind of

response after our ‘*moment*’ in the elevator on Friday but I didn’t want to know. The last thing I needed was to think with my pussy right now.

She always got me into a fuck ton of trouble, Hell, look at Kallum. Not exactly an all-star track record of decision-making.

Wrath studied me with interest, his green eyes augmented by the unseasonably green grass. “Topsider.”

“My prince,” I teased, bending in a mock curtsy.

Riot scoffed a laugh that she tried and failed to cover with a cough.

Interesting. Maybe the stick wedged in her ass was only halfway up.

“Wrath and Spinner, you’re captains. Pick your teammates and decide who’s playing first.” Guts called as he counted us out. “Looks like you almost have enough for full sides—We won’t be using subs so pick your seven and be done with it. Lucky will fill in the gap for the team of six.”

“Alright, you heard him,” Wrath called loudly, clapping his hands for attention. “Line up.”

Spinner was the short, ham-handed man that had called to Dice. His tongue darted out to lick his lips nervously, sweat already shining on his shaved head. “Take the first pick, Your Highness.”

“Riot.”

The girl in question grinned and rolled her brown eyes, tightening her ponytail as she made her way to stand beside the blonde.

“Thumper,” Spinner called and a wiry girl that looked hardly older than eighteen moved to stand beside him.

And so it went on, Poison, Trigger, Ace, and Bookie joining Wrath’s team.

Maverick, Snake, Picasso, and Weaver made their way over to Spinner’s.

I scoffed. How fucking high school that they were going to pick me last. Especially when the other person left was a frail, pockmarked human named Frisk.

Wrath smirked, toying with one of his many earrings as he looked between us. “Topsider, what do you think about being a runner?”

“The... point scorer?” I asked in surprise.

“Yes,” he said impatiently. “You’d be responsible for getting the flags into the drop zone.”

I’d been running my whole life, this was just another package for handoff. Getting through the other team was another version of running

from cops or nasty dobermans. Child's play.

"Of course."

"Great. Try not to get yourself hurt."

I joined the rest of my team and Poison grinned, clapping me on the back.

"I'll be playing chaser. Ace will be the second runner," Wrath announced. "Riot?"

Riot stretched lazily. "Chaser."

That left Poison, Trigger, and Bookie to play safeguard.

"Don't worry precious." They grinned, slinging their arm over my shoulders. "I'll keep you safe."

COACH WARNER HAD US wait on either side of the field. Six flags were pounded into the dirt along the painted line marking its middle, white fabric dancing in the chilly wind.

"You've got this, dollface," Dice called cheerfully, his hands on the ground like he was waiting to spring into action. From his position on the field, I guessed he was a safeguard, which meant I'd need to be quick if I didn't want his longer strides to overwhelm me.

"That's not my fucking name, dipshit," I growled.

"Well earn one then, dollface," Wrath drawled at my back.

"Fuck off, prince dickhead," I spat through clenched teeth.

"Enough flirting," Wrath said smoothly. "I'd like you to focus on winning—" I didn't bother to listen to the rest, too focused on the feeling of Kallum's eyes boring a hole in the side of my head.

If looks could kill, I'd be pig food by now. Like that rat was *supposed* to be. I'd watched fifty-seven hogs devour him myself. And yet here he fucking was.

My eyes sought the Irish asshole, finding him on the other side of the field. His freckled nose scrunched as he scowled at me, stare filled with the promise of violence.

I shook off the shiver skating down my back, steeling myself.

What's the worst that could happen? I was already dead.

Warner blew the whistle, and I yanked out the first flag, sprinting for a hole between Dice and Kallum. I twisted to the side at the last second, slipping past their bodies with a whoop of glee.

For the first time in days, I finally felt *alive*. My blood sang in my veins with excitement as I hurtled across the grass. Heavy footfalls followed me step for step as I threw myself into the treeline, slowing just enough to be able to safely make it over the uneven terrain.

I didn't dare look behind me, but the crack of twigs and rustle of leaves made it clear that Dice or Kallum was still in pursuit.

The moment the small clearing and painted box came into view I lost my footing and tripped on a lifted root, sprawling over the dirt. My ankle twisted painfully and my chest ached where roots and twigs dug into my skin. I cursed under my breath, grabbing for the flag that I'd lost during the tumble. Almost out of thin air, Poison appeared, offering their hand.

"Let's get you to the goal, shall we?"

I took their hand, letting them haul me to my feet just as Kallum reached us. "Get your fucking hands off my girl, shapeshifter!"

"Your girl?" I asked incredulously. "*Lucky*, I know you aren't the brightest crayon in the box, babe, but when a girl drowns you—you can pretty much assume you've broken up."

"Brutal," praised Poison, giving me a little shove. "Go on, I'll keep him busy."

I grinned, my fingers tightening around the flag. "Thanks, sweetheart!" I called over my shoulder, ignoring the twinge of my ankle. It was twisted—probably—at least it didn't feel sprained or broken. Just a little sore.

Somehow, even though I'd only known Poison for a short time, I knew I could trust them. Something that I'd had difficulty doing since the fuck face he was protecting me from smashed my heart into a million pieces.

I could forgive a lot of shit, but if there was one thing there was no coming back from it was talking to *cops*. Kallum had broken the most important rule of the mob, and I'd had to pay the price. It wasn't exactly a walk in the park to kill a guy you thought you'd spend the rest of your life with. Even worse to hack up his corpse and feed it to a bunch of fucking farm animals.

I tossed the flag into the marked box and an alarm blared the second the pole hit the wooden bottom, ringing through the stadium like a siren.

It was *fun*. Something I'd been missing the last few days. The adrenaline. The feeling of accomplishment.

The control.

I had to skirt around Poison and Kallum as they sparred to get back to the flags, my pace a little slower now that I was favouring one foot. I tossed the flag to Ace and he grinned, tearing off into the woods while I caught my breath. The alarm blared again shortly after, Ace returning inhumanly fast. For a dweeb—all spindly legs and thick, round glasses—the guy was shockingly athletic.

Grabbing the last flag, I sprinted full force towards the forest, doing my best to ignore the pain with each step. If Wrath was to be trusted, it would heal itself in no time anyway.

The woods were quiet, the sound of Poison and Kallum's fight replaced by the rhythmic rustle of leaves. I broke through the clearing, a weight smashing into my back and splaying me flat under a heavy, familiar body. I rolled and kicked, trying to get my assailant off of me, but froze as my eyes locked with Kallum's, now straddling my hips.

The twinge in my ankle was forgotten to the throb along my spine.

"Do you really think I'm just going to let you get away with it?" Kallum snarled. "You're the fuckin' reason I'm here in the first place!"

"How do you figure?" I snapped, wriggling in his hold. He'd trapped my arms with his hands and though I was fierce, Kallum still had over a hundred pounds on me. "I didn't make your shitty life choices for you, Kallum. You were a cunt all on your own."

"I'm willing to bet you didn't give me a good, honest, Catholic burial," he hissed and I laughed.

And laughed.

I laughed so hard that my abs ached and tears pricked at my eyes.

Kallum gripped my face, his fingers digging into my cheeks, eyes wild with rage. "Stop fucking laughing, Liv."

It only made me laugh harder. "Do you want," as not broke my words as I bucked my hips, trying to unseat him from me, "to know what I did to your body?"

His jaw ticked and he shook me hard enough that it felt like my brain was rattling around inside my skull. "Spit it out bitch."

"I put you in a fucking freezer!" I howled. "And forgot about you for a *YEAR*! I only bothered to hack you up and feed you to the pigs when I did

because I thought Liam finally figured it out that I'd—"

Kallum slammed me against the ground hard enough to knock the wind from my lungs. His grip found my throat, fingers flexing and removing any chance I had to catch my breath. I skipped trying to pry his hands away—something that I knew from experience hardly ever worked—and clawed at his face with my hands. My fingernails left deep scratches, and his body shifted just enough as I got near his eye socket that I was able to bring my knee into his groin. Kallum's hold slackened and I wriggled free of his grasp, rolling to army crawl to the flag that I'd dropped during Kallum's assault. He was still clutching his balls as I hauled myself to my feet, staggering for the drop zone.

The alarm blared with finality as I threw the flag into the box, spitting blood onto the grass.

Poison and Ace reached us as Kallum regained his composure, their eyes flicking between us with open-mouthed surprise.

"It wasn't even a real game," muttered Ace, pushing his circular glasses up his sweaty nose.

Poison's jaw tightened as they took in my dishevelled appearance, a glimmer of anger in their voice as they spoke. "You alright?"

I nodded, not quite trusting my abused vocal cords. They took my elbow, helping me pick my way back into the middle of the arena, leaving Ace to deal with Kallum's bloody face and bruised ego.

The team raced to meet us as we broke through the trees, patting my back and chattering excitedly about our 3-0 win.

Even Wrath looked begrudgingly impressed.

"That was one Heaven of a game!" Warner called excitedly. "And a great time for an untrained new—" The coach's voice stopped abruptly as Kallum and Ace stepped onto the pitch.

Every pair of eyes seemed to land on the split skin and claw marks decorating Kallum's face in unison.

"Looks like you had some resistance on that last goal."

"Damn babe, did he tell you that your eyebrows were uneven or something?" Dice snickered as he came to meet the rest of the group.

"Something like that," I muttered, my voice raspy after the rough treatment of my oesophagus. I touched my neck, feeling for the bruises that would undoubtedly be forming by now.

“Lucky,” Wrath sneered, grinding his teeth. “Get to the infirmary, your face is making me queasier than usual.” He looked at me sidelong, his jade eyes appraising as they swept over my dirty uniform and the blood crusted under my fingernails. “Good work, Talon.”

“I thought it was dollface?” I asked.

“Do you want a name or not?” Wrath snarked back, eyes narrowed.

Whispers broke out along the field, things like “Topsider” and “Talon” easily distinguishable in my classmates’ mouths.

“I think it suits you,” Dice said, even as I ignored his attempts to catch my eye.

“I think it sounds like I’m in big trouble,” I replied shortly, shaking off Poison’s comforting touch and stomping towards the changing rooms.

I needed to wash Kallum’s blood off my hands before I could think straight. Then I could figure out what I was going to do about his threat.

WRATH

NINE

I leaned back in my chair as Ace slid my lunch onto the table in front of me, fiddling with the cuff of my jacket. Steak—blue rare of course—and a salad composed mostly of dark leafy greens that tasted more like dirt than food, no dressing.

Predictable.

Safe.

Irritating.

Eating the same thing every day needled me, but it wasn't like I could choke down pizza by the slice like Dice or drown my bad temper in carbohydrates like Riot. Seriously, she was tiny, where the fuck did it all go? Because it didn't matter that I was taking an overfull course load this year, I still had babies to kiss and the press to impress in my limited free time.

I even had a cover shoot for *Demon Quarterly* at the end of the month, which meant that the freshman fifteen was not an option. I could hardly show up without my trademark abs ready to be oiled, now could I?

Ace sat opposite me while I prodded the salad with my fork listlessly. He chewed his thin bottom lip. "Is it not to your liking, sir?"

I cut a thin piece of the steak, trying not to grimace.

Ace was prone to worrying over the smallest amount of my displeasure; it's what made him an excellent assistant, but, it also made him annoying as fuck. It wasn't his fault that I was in a foul mood, though if Dice didn't take his flirting elsewhere it would shortly be his. The co-ed he'd strung along his lap was sucking noisily at his neck, doing away with the last of my appetite.

“It's adequate,” I muttered to Ace, freeing my phone from my pants pocket as it buzzed for what felt like the hundredth time today.

HIS ROYAL DOUCHINESS

How is her first day going? Has she been named yet?

I OPENED the text thread to the dozen other questions my father asked since I'd been ordered to show *her* around Friday night. It was infuriating. He hardly made the time to ask me about myself or my day and yet this nobody topsider—*Talon*—I corrected myself with an internalised sneer, seemed to be all he could think about.

I didn't like it.

Whenever Lucifer showed interest in anything other than himself it meant trouble for everyone involved.

Which meant that I, under no circumstance, would not be getting involved.

Dice nibbled on the earlobe of his '*date*', whispering something to her that made her flush.

“Some of us are trying to eat,” snapped Riot, using her fork to push her lasagna around her plate with an expression that spelled imminent violence.

“So am I,” purred Dice suggestively, his fingers snaking under the hem of the girl's rolled skirt.

I rolled my eyes, setting my phone face down on the table so I could focus on eating when Poison thumped down in the seat at my left hand.

“She's something else isn't she?” they asked, licking the icing off the top of a cupcake.

Chocolate with those little flat sprinkles that were *just* the right amount of crunch. The very idea made my mouth water.

Of course the shapeshifter could eat whatever the fuck they wanted, whenever they wanted. Bastard.

“Who?” Ace snapped, his eyes narrowed behind his glasses.

I rolled my eyes.

As if they could have been referring to anyone other than Talon.

Riot raised her eyebrows at them. “I didn't think you'd sit with us anymore, 52 Pickup.”

I watched with rapt attention as Poison delicately peeled the paper from the bottom of the cupcake, their dark eyebrows pulled together with anger. “That reminds me, Dice, you jealous fuck, want to tell me what—”

Whatever the end of Poison’s sentence was, it was forgotten as Talon passed with her friends, Mouse and the nephilim. Her voice was animated as she recounted her victory on the prey field, arms flailing as she spoke.

It was—I loathed to admit it—endearing. From what I’d seen of the girl so far she was serious, calculating. But there was a delightfully childish side of her that shone when no one else was looking. Like she forgot that she was supposed to be a criminal and was nothing but a normal college student.

I couldn’t afford to have thoughts like that. Not when my father’s texts were burning a hole in the table the longer they went unanswered.

Are you trying to protect her or yourself?

A question I’d asked myself a hundred times since Friday night and was no closer to answering. My gut reaction was to say me. My friends. My plan to escape the royal family and disappear to the surface until the end of my days. But then the picture of Talon, her jaw set with determination as she looked at the leaderboard would muddy the image. Or the way her fathomless brown eyes hooded as I leaned into her in the elevator. It made me wonder how she’d react if—*No*.

There would be no *if*.

Talon was off-limits. A threat to everything I—we had worked for. Everything we sacrificed.

Especially Riot.

I glanced at my friend, surreptitiously checking that the smoke Dice’d told me about hadn’t returned and found her eyes locked on the topsider’s back.

A quick look around at my friends confirmed my fear, every pair of eyes was on the one person in the room that they should be ignoring. *Needed* to ignore. I cleared my throat loudly. “I seem to recall telling you all that the topsider is off-limits.”

“I don’t see why,” grumbled Dice. “She’s just a girl.”

“Am *I* just a girl?” the demoness in his lap crooned.

“No, baby, of course not.” He grinned, though even I could tell any interest he’d had dried up to be replaced by his latest fixation.

She huffed, sliding off my friend's lap. "I'm going to freshen up, meet me in the bathroom in ten minutes?"

"Sure," Dice said noncommittally as Talon sat down a few tables over.

Even if he did make it to his hookup, I had a feeling that a pretty brunette would be the face he pictured when his eyes closed.

I scoffed, flipping my phone and opening the text chain with my dad, sliding it across the table to Dice who picked it up to thumb through the messages. His eyes flicked to where Talon sat with her friends, sipping soda and eating a piece of pizza that was dripping with melted cheese.

The scene was so carefree that it pissed me off.

Did everyone in this damned place have an excellent metabolism but me?

"I'll see you guys later," Poison grinned, making their way directly for Talon and her friends. If I didn't suspect that they were just trying to fuck her, I'd be royally pissed off at the insubordination. But Poison's attention span was short, it wouldn't take long before they were over their crush. It was easier to let things run their course.

"Who do you think she is?" Dice asked, sliding the phone to Riot.

Ace watched with interest as Riot read, but he wasn't in the inner circle. He didn't have the authority to read through my personal messages with my father—and he wouldn't dream of crossing that line—I was the difference between him being a member of The Ten or a part of the eleven plus. Otherwise known as *losers*.

Dice growled as Poison sidled up beside Talon, taking up the empty seat at her side. "I fucking hate that shapeshifting asshole."

"Just fuck them and be done with it," hissed Riot, bristling. "I don't want to listen to you bitch every time you come to my room this semester."

"Enough! Dice keep the fuck away from both of them if you have to—that girl is nothing but trouble for us. If Lucifer wants something with her... Whatever her deal is, it can't be good."

"You think she made an agreement?" asked Riot, her dark brows furrowed. "I guess it would explain how she's so..."

"Perfect for this place?" Dice asked, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah," I muttered.

Dice scratched at the five o'clock shadow along his dark jaw. "What's the worst that could happen? Honestly, Boss, she's never going to make

rank. Maybe your dad is just curious. It's been a while since someone so young had such a big debt, right? From what the brokers say she was just some wealthy American."

The vein in my temple pulsed with irritation.

Dice was living in a fantasy if he believed that. Did he miss the marks on her throat this morning? The way that she'd come within an inch of gauging out Lucky's eyes with her bare fucking hands? No spoiled brat socialite had instincts like that. They would've tried to pry his hands off.

Riot scoffed. "You really are an idiot if you believe that shit, D. Did you see how she handled herself today? That's not your normal spoiled brat rich girl. I've never seen anyone run like that before."

"It doesn't fucking matter who or what she is," I snapped. "Getting involved risks our ranks which means everything—*all of it!*—the sacrifices we made..." I looked flatly at Riot, my eyes seeking the bonding mark on her arm as if I could see through the fabric of her jacket, "was for *nothing*."

Riot rubbed her forearm, a nervous tick that formed shortly after she'd bonded with Shadow last year. A mindless dog, barely demon enough that it would change her soul's reading from mortal to demonic. Just enough of a shift that we would be able to cross back into the mortal world together. It had been painful and incredibly difficult to manage, but with a little research and ingenuity, you could do anything.

Especially when you had unlimited resources.

"Fine," she hissed, collecting her bag. Her plate of lasagna sitting untouched. "Easy for you to say! Not sleeping in her room and sharing most of her classes."

I shrugged. "That seems like a *you* problem, Riot."

"What if you're looking at this all wrong, Boss?" Dice said slowly, scratching his jaw. "Maybe we need somebody to keep an eye on her?"

"Poison seems to be doing a good job of that," Riot scoffed.

"Yeah, but they aren't one of us. *The three heads of Cerberus*, I mean." Dice insisted.

I smiled a little at the old nickname given to us by my mother, my mood lifting.

"Think about it. Whatever her deal is, eventually she's going to need someone's help right?"

I drummed my fingers on the tabletop. As much as I wanted to argue, Dice was making a half-decent point. "I would need to complete a risk assessment..."

"Risk assessment, shmisk assessment." Dice pulled a coin from his pocket, holding it at eye level. The gold-plated imprint of a beautiful woman with long, flowing hair and plush parted lips stared blithely into the room.

The coin was Dice's lucky charm. I would've believed it was loaded if I hadn't flipped it myself every now and again. No fixing that I could detect. The bastard really did just have a horseshoe stuck up his ass.

"You want to leave it up to chance?" Riot asked incredulously.

I glanced between the pair, anxiety roiling in my stomach. "But what if —"

"Heads and we follow your plan, prince. Tails and it's all my plan. Deal?"

I groaned. "That's idiotic. What if my dad's whole game is that he wants us to get involved with her? I'm not dealing with some human bitch for the rest of my eternity, thanks."

Riot scoffed. "I think you're just a big, fat, calculator-obsessed chicken."

"Fat?" I squawked. "A big fat chicken? You're going to call me a chicken?" I slammed my hand down on the table so hard the dishes rattled.

Riot clucked and I saw red.

"Fine, flip it."

I realised my mistake half a second too late, Riot's eager grin splitting her face. She'd baited me, the filthy human minx.

Dice flicked his thumb forward, and the little medallion twirled in the air, flipping over itself until it landed on the back of Dice's waiting palm. He covered it with his hand, holding it towards Riot.

"Care to be the ref?"

"Show it," she snapped and Dice moved his hand, revealing an imprint of a crow staring up at the three of us proudly.

Dice whooped with excitement as I slumped back in my chair.

I'd been played for a fucking fool.

"Dibs on being her keeper." Dice grinned, tucking his coin away.

Riot glared at him. "I thought since I was her roommate—"

“Tough break Riot, seems like you should have called dibs. You know that the dibs is our most sacred—”

“You fucking asshole! I helped get him to agree!”

“Enough! You’re giving me a headache.” I held my hand up, cutting off Riot’s retort. “Dice will watch the girl. Now shut the fuck up and eat your lunch. I only have fifteen minutes before I need to get to class, and I intend on using it to eat something and think about anything other than Talon.”

Riot’s jaw worked with fury, her dark eyes blazing. With anyone else she would have yelled or even struck, but with me? She knew better.

“I can’t keep avoiding her, she already thinks I’m an asshole.”

“Not my problem,” I muttered, shoving a bite of steak into my mouth.

She stormed off, her chair clattering to the floor with a bang that drew eyes.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” I muttered to my friend. We’d known each other since we were cherub-cheeked babies. I’d trust Dice with my life. But, he was *impulsive*.

And his impulses didn’t always come without consequences.

He grinned in a flash of straight, white teeth. “How much trouble could she be?”

ARITHMANCY WAS MY FAVOURITE SUBJECT.

Not only was it the only class where I was practically alone—save for Ace who seemed to have bribed the administration to be in every single one of my lessons—but mathematics had always been where I shined.

No guesswork. Only formulas.

We settled into our usual seats tucked into the back of the room against the windows. It was the only spot in the class where there was a space between us and the next student, offering a precious crumb of privacy.

Ace liked the window, so I took the middle seat, opening my books and waiting for the class to begin when the door swung open.

“Ah! Good.” Professor Node smiled warmly at the topsider.

Our small, frail arithmancy teacher looked something like an ancient version of Ace. Thin, hunched, and bespectacled. That was if demons aged

as poorly as humans, of course. Node was ancient.

He wrung his hands together. "I'm glad you were able to find us alright. I'm afraid this class is quite full, so we'll have to squeeze in a bit.

"The map is great, honestly. And don't worry, stick me wherever you need to," Talon said, her smile soft as she glanced around the room.

Our eyes met for a few long seconds, curiosity in her warm brown gaze.

I don't get it. What in Heaven does he want with her? She's nothing special.

"Take a seat next to Wrath."

"There isn't another place?" she asked quietly, her eyes not leaving mine.

"This class is full, miss. Unless you'd rather take it from the hall."

She sighed and tramped up the steps towards me, the plaid of her skirt swishing around her olive thighs. Her dark hair was loose around her shoulders, falling in waves around her in an attempt to hide her bruised throat—already fading thanks to the rapid healing on campus. When she reached where I sat she breezed by, sitting down heavily in her chair and pulling out her books.

"Hi," she said shortly.

"Hello," I intoned back carefully. "Did you enjoy your lunch?"

I tried and failed not to think about the way Poison had brushed a stray strand of hair away from her face.

Or the way she'd blushed when they did it.

I couldn't afford to get tangled up in whatever web she'd trapped my friends in. Not when my father's interest spelt trouble. My phone was practically burning a hole in the pocket of my tailored pants, demanding that I respond to the onslaught of messages I'd been ignoring since lunch. Besides, at the end of the day, Dice was right. She was just a girl. A totally normal, human—

"I expected the food to be gross," she tapped her stylus against her tablet thoughtfully. "But nothing about this place is really what I expected."

Ace rolled his eyes, scoffing. "We're hardly going to torture ourselves."

Irritation pricked my spine.

Sure, I didn't necessarily like the new girl, but that didn't mean that Ace had the right to talk down to her.

"I guess not," Talon replied stiffly, her eyes on the board where Node was scribbling down an equation.

I watched her take notes as the professor began his lecture, her brows pulled together in concentration. Ace would forward me a copy of his meticulous notes after the lecture, leaving my hands free to idly sketch my classmates—my guilty pleasure.

The lines of Talon's face snapped together quickly, her thin nose, wide eyes and high cheekbones like something from a cartoon. Impossibly sweet for a woman with a mouth like hers.

"Fucksakes," she muttered under her breath. "What the fuck is wrong with math here?"

"It's not so difficult," I drawled, leaning back in my seat to hide my screen from her. I didn't know why I wanted to keep the drawing private. It didn't mean anything. I had hundreds of sketches of Riot and Dice, some of them I'd even pinned to the walls of my room.

"Yeah, sure," she snapped. "Shut up, I'm trying to listen to the lecture."

I growled. No one talked to me like that, but before I could tell her off Professor Node called her name.

"Talon, would you like to come up and take a crack at the problem?"

"Fucksakes," she repeated, making her way slowly to the board at the front of the room. She took up the chalk with her back to us, shoulders high with tension.

Like a rabbit caught in a trap.

Ace leaned over in his seat, his glasses flashing in the light from the window. "Riot will be thrilled you have a class with her."

I rolled my eyes. "Riot needs to work on her anger issues. She's acting like a child."

"Well, she *is* only human," Ace scoffed.

Not anymore.

Anger burned through my veins. Not that I could tell Ace what we'd done over the summer. Strictly speaking, bonding a human soul to a demon wasn't entirely legal—it was old magic and exceptionally dangerous.

I tugged at my dangling cross earring.

Riot was different since she'd been bonded. She'd always had a short temper, but now? She was was like a bomb. The slightest provocation and she'd detonate. And then there was the *smoke*. I'd yet to see it myself, but I trusted that it was real.

Another complication. Something else that I'd need to find a solution to.

Talon slowly started to mark her way through the problem, her answer far from the correct sum after an error early in the equation impacted the rest of her work.

There was a smattering of laughter around the room as Node corrected her.

"What level of education did you have before you died?" the professor asked, not unkindly.

"I was in my third year of university. I was taking a general arts degree, going into law."

Even I snickered at that admission. We saw more lawyers than nearly anything else down here.

"Come speak with me after class," Node said, mopping the sweat off his bald spot with a handkerchief from his pocket.

"If I must."

I tucked away her troubles with arithmetic for later as she slid back into her chair. I'd need every weakness I could get if I was going to stomp her into the dirt.

No chance I'd let *her* get between me and getting the fuck out of here.

TALON

TEN

I wasn't hiding from Kallum. It was more like I didn't want to get caught alone by him.

That asshole had an entire year to figure this place out and make connections where I was still trying to grasp the basics. I'd almost say it wasn't fair, but since I was the reason he had a head start, I couldn't *really* cry favouritism.

I sighed and leaned against the glass of the window, resting my cheek on its cool surface. The dorm was my safe space since only my roommates and I could get in—and there was no way Poison or Mouse would invite Kallum over for a study session.

Riot on the other hand?

My eyes roved the mussed bedsheets tangled around her sleeping body, her phone beside her on the mattress, still playing whatever video she was watching before she'd passed out.

As often as I spent hiding—*studying*—in our room, Riot was here too.

We weren't close enough for me to ask, we barely talked at all since the brunette had practically made it her life's mission to ignore me, but I wondered if everything was alright with her. No one who loved their life napped *that* much.

Not that I was one to talk. I'd spend all my time trying to escape the pathetic reality I'd landed myself in if I could. But sleep and I hadn't been friends the last few nights. It left me irritable and jumpy. A deadly combination.

Fuck, I missed Penny. Mouse was cool and we got along well—I even liked hanging with Poison when I could, though they were often AWOL

with whatever they did in their free time—but there was something about having your life turned inside out that made a girl miss her best friend.

And Wes. I'd never gone this long without talking to him before. I felt his absence like a missing limb.

I rubbed the heel of my hand over my eyes, finding them damp with tears.

Okay, yeah, I'm officially having a pity party.

Now that Kallum was involved it changed everything. I didn't just *want* to climb the rank ladder, I needed to.

If I was in his shoes, I'd do everything I could to sabotage his chances of going to the next year. It's absolutely what I'd do to Liam for shooting me—and find some way to give him crabs or something. The fucker deserved it.

I mean come on! Shooting me in an alley? While I was on a date? Asshole behaviour.

My alarm cut through the quiet of the dorm and I jerked into motion, quickly silencing it. Today was Thursday, which meant that I was expected to attend my first prey practice since I'd been placed on the team.

Go, Rams!

Riot stirred, groaning softly as I tiptoed around the room, collecting a duffle of sports gear and slinging it over my shoulder.

It'd appeared on the top of my trunk the day after I'd clawed Kallum's face to shit, filled with a sturdy pair of leather boots, a varsity jacket, two uniforms—the first of which I'd dressed in already—and a water bottle, of course. My name and the position I'd been drafted for were stitched into the front of the bag in a mix of silver and red thread. The effect was vampiric as much as it was collegiate.

Participation was—unsurprisingly—not optional.

I tucked my phone into one of the many pockets of the heavy, black, jogger-style pants that made up the bottom half of my uniform, stepping into the hall to find Dice strolling my way. An easy smile tugged at his full mouth, his hand running over the top of his damp hair.

“Talon! I was just coming to make sure you weren't going to skip out on practice.”

“Why would I do that?” I asked, trying and failing to ignore the way that the fitted crimson long sleeve hugged his powerful shoulders. If the demon flexed, the fabric was liable to split at the seams.

Santo Dio.

“Err,” Dice wavered. “I guess I thought with Luck—”

“As if I’m going to let that dipshit intimidate me,” I scoffed, closing the door with more force than necessary.

“Right,” Dice held his palms up in surrender as I stormed towards him. “Do you want to walk together?”

I scoffed. As if my preference would make any difference.

“Do I really have a choice?”

“Well—”

“That’s what I thought,”

“Talon, hey! Hang on a second.” His fingers circled my wrist as I moved to breeze by, stopping me in my tracks. “I think we got off on the wrong foot.”

I scowled at him. “Insulting my friends isn’t the wrong foot, Dice. It’s a non-starter. If you think I’m going to just roll over and—”

“I’m sorry, okay?” he interrupted, his strange purple gaze meeting mine. “I was out of line, I shouldn’t have said that stuff.”

Surprise sang through me. I knew guys like Dice—the life of the party, fast cars, faster women, and whatever was new, shiny and too expensive—they didn’t apologise. Too busy posturing for other *idiot*a like them.

“I like you. You’re smart and can hold your own. I don’t want my big mouth to be the reason we don’t hang out, okay? C’mon... give me another chance.”

“You aren’t going to leave me alone until I say yes, are you?”

“Nope,” he popped the ‘p’, grinning toothily.

“Fine,” I groaned, tugging my wrist free. “Hurry up, Poison told me Coach makes us do laps if we’re late.”

“He does,” Dice agreed, letting me lead him down the hall, past the common room and into the elevator.

The moment he squeezed through the sliding doors I was reminded, for what felt like the millionth time, of his size. He leaned against the reflective wall of the carriage, not that it did any good. I could still smell him like he’d flattened me against the wall with his body. Allspice and bourbon.

Warm and spicy and sexy.

He was dressed in a uniform that matched mine, pants that reminded me of something you’d buy at an army surplus store, save for the chains

dangling from the belt loops and a matching long sleeve t-shirt. The school's crest sat above his heart, rising and falling with his slow breaths.

As much as I hated to admit it... Dice was *hot*. It was easy to see why he had a different girl with him at every opportunity.

It made him a major hypocrite since he thought it was cool to talk shit about Poison. At least *they* were subtle.

I cleared my throat and forced my eyes to the ceiling, just about the only place in the tiny tin box where I could look without seeing him. I wasn't supposed to find Dice hot. He was an asshole for one. And for two... Actually, no. That was it.

Dice was an asshole. And I was done dating assholes. It's what landed me here in the first place. Besides, I wasn't interested in spending my eternity trying to manage some douchebag's testosterone-fuelled feelings.

"Have you thought about your first deal at all?" he asked as the carriage smoothly descended.

"It's all I think about," I grumbled, shoving my hands into my pockets.

"Any idea who you want to ask?"

"I—Well..."

Yes, I had thought about who would be a good candidate for my first deal. I just wasn't sure if I was ballsy enough to pull it off. No matter who it was, I needed to secure myself a means to raise my rank *and* get Kallum the hell off my back. Not exactly an easy task.

"I'm not sure yet."

"What if you make the bet with me?" he offered as the doors opened, spitting us out in the lobby. "I won't even negotiate the terms or the payout. It'll be practice."

"Why would you possibly agree to that?" I asked suspiciously.

There's no way that a favour like that came without a price.

He grinned. "Ask anyone, I'm a compulsive gambler. But, I'm pretty sure no matter what you bet I'll be the one winning it anyway."

"Maybe," I said noncommittally. "Did you make a bet on me doing a deal with you first or something? It's the second time you've brought it up."

"No," he said flatly. "I just don't like Lucky."

I weighed this as we made our way into the grounds, taking the tree-lined path towards the stadium. Wind whipped through the leaves, sending droplets of water from the day's rain down on us.

It was rare to see Dice without his two cronies, Chips and Spinner. Even rarer to find him completely alone.

I cut a look at him, studying the five o'clock shadow dusting his strong jaw.

"You know," I mused aloud, the whisper of a plan beginning to form. "I feel like I always see you with a different girl."

"What about it?" Dice asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Just that I think you're a bit of a player."

"That's rich, coming from someone who's besties with Poison."

I glared at the demon and he shrugged.

"I'm not being mean, just pointing out the facts."

"Do demons not do girlfriends or something?"

Dice laughed, a warm noise that drifted through the air like the hook of a pop song. "Of course we *do* girlfriends." He rolled his eyes. "Just because we don't see a point in monogamy like you puritanical folks doesn't mean we don't have *relationships*."

"No point in monogamy?" I parroted, my eyes widening. "So, what, you date... multiple people at once?"

"*Obviously*. We're immortal, that's an awfully long time to spend with one person. Even one as cute as you. We can date or even marry whoever we want. Though I think demon unions are a little different than what you'd be imagining."

"Are you seeing anyone?" I asked, keeping my tone light and conversational as we approached the dome.

"Not seriously, no," Dice replied. "Why, you interested?"

We skipped the changing rooms, entering through a side door into a tunnel that would lead us straight onto the pitch, my laugh echoing off the walls.

"A no would have been fine," Dice grumbled.

"I don't see dating anyone in my future," I jeered.

The last thing I needed right now was a boyfriend. Or a girlfriend. Or whatever Poison would want me to call them if we—I shook myself mentally.

Where the fuck did that come from?

Like my thoughts alone summoned them, the charming shapeshifter waved a long arm over their head in greeting as I approached.

“See ya later,” I said to Dice, hoisting my bag further onto my shoulder.

“Think about what I said,” Dice replied with a wink. “I’ll scratch your back—no need to scratch mine, babe.”

I rolled my eyes and broke off into a jog, dropping my bag at Poison’s feet with a thump.

“Hey, missed you after class.”

They blew out a breath. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t walk you. I got caught up with a client.”

“Don’t worry about it. Want to grab a late dinner after practice? We could watch a movie in the common room after?”

“Absolutely! Hey, actually I was thinking maybe we could—”

The whistle shrieked as Warner strode into the middle of the pitch, cutting off Poison’s sentence.

“Today I want to focus on getting out of tricky situations. Talon, you’re the newest member of the team, so you’ll need to try and keep up with everyone else.”

I nodded, pressing my lips together in a thin line.

“Don’t worry, Coach, she’s as slippery as they come,” snarked Kallum to a mix of snickers.

“Bastardo,” I muttered, my hands flexing at my sides.

“Pair up, let’s see if you can hold your own.”

PRACTICE LEFT ME SWEATY, sore, and covered in mud.

I hit the showers, scrubbing at the stubborn dirt caked into my hair for what felt like *forever*. The locker room was deserted by the time I towelled off and dressed—fine by me, I wasn’t keen to spend any more time with my teammates than I had to. Especially after the beating I took from Guts.

Everything. Hurt.

My tie hung undone around my neck as I slung my duffle bag over my shoulder, making my way into the night.

I needed to meet Poison for our—well, I couldn’t really call it a *date*. And maybe after an evening of running around outside I’d even get some sleep tonight.

Warner wasn't joking when he said that practice was going to be draining mentally and physically. Turns out that being chased down by monsters was exactly as scary as it sounded. Even if, somehow, my ex-boyfriend managed to be at least three times as scary as Guts' transformed figure.

During games and practice, our demonic classmates were permitted to remove their glamour. It left me with a lot of thinking to do—namely on why I flushed all over when Poison transformed their arms into thick, wriggling tentacles and wrapped them around my body.

Maybe my evening would just be food and sleep—movie night could wait until tomorrow. Some rest would get my head back on straight.

I was fantasizing about being carried the rest of the way to the dorms when Frenchie's whine interrupted my daydream. I spotted them just up ahead, Poison's back leaning against a tree just off the path, Frenchie boxing them in with a knee between their legs.

"Come on, P!" She ran her claw-like nails down the demon's cheek, her bottom lip jutting out. "Please? I miss you."

Poison looked away, their shoulders tight with tension. "No, thank you. I have plans tonight."

Frenchie's pout quickly became a glare, her body language shifting as quickly as her face. I intercepted her on instinct, my hand snatching her wrist and pulling it away from where she was touching Poison's cheek. She turned her angry eyes on me and my lip curled in disgust.

"No means no," I snapped, shoving her away from me with as much force as I could muster one-handed.

She growled and lunged forward. "You're going to regret that bitch!"

"Doubtful." I sneered, sidestepping her open palm. I shook off my irritation and turned to Poison with the flash of a cheeky grin that was only for them, completely ignoring Frenchie. "Ready?"

"Yes." Poison smiled as I took their hand, all but dragging me down the path towards our dorms. "See you tomorrow Frenchie," they called over their shoulder, waving jovially as we rounded the bend.

"You shouldn't let her talk to you like that," I seethed, picking up my pace.

"I know," they muttered, squeezing my hand.

We walked in companionable silence to the dorms, grabbing some dinner—pizza for them, a salmon salad for me—and settling at our usual

table.

“What's your deal with Frenchie anyway—do you have like a degradation kink or something?” I asked through a mouthful of leafy greens.

Poison choked on their soda, coughing loudly. “Not exactly. She's a client of mine.”

“A client?” I asked in confusion.

“We make regular deals,” they went on, pulling a box of cigarettes from their pocket and fiddling with the cardboard top. “She gets me to transform into Riot and fuck her like three times a week.”

“Do you always change into somebody else when you're, um, *with a client*?”

“Usually, yes. Why would someone want to sleep with me when they could indulge in their wildest fantasies?”

“What the fuck—is that how you feel about yourself?” The horror in my voice was surprising to me. Sure I'd spent a blissful weekend in Poison's glowing company, but they were... I don't know! *Poison!*

Confusing and charming and way too forward and a little mysterious and... fuck. Okay. *I liked them.*

“Of course,” they shrugged, bringing a bite of salad to their mouth with my fork. “I'm not in the business of lying to myself.”

I reached across the table, my fingers grazing their knuckles. “No. That's so fucked. You don't have to be anyone but yourself with me, okay?”

They smirked, “Is this your way of saying I'm your type?”

“Maybe,” I teased, my voice pathetically breathless to my ears as my stomach filled with butterflies. “Almost done? I'm dying to lay in my bed.”

“I thought we were going to watch a movie?”

I pushed out my bottom lip, my entire body still aching from practice. “We were... but what if we watch one on my tablet instead? My legs feel like they are going to fall off.”

“Fine, fine.” They slid their tray to the side, setting their cheek on their hand. “You know, if you wanted me in your bed you could have just said so, precious.”

I laughed even as I squeezed my thighs together. I didn't care what Poison did in their deals. It made no difference in how much I wanted

them, but I wasn't interested in it being some kind of agreement.

I liked Poison. When we came together like that—I wanted them to know it was for them and no one else.

We headed up to our room, parting ways briefly to change into our pyjamas. When I returned, Poison was stretched across my bed, their t-shirt rucked up to expose an expanse of flat stomach as they scrolled the options on HelFireTV.

I sat on the edge of the bed, a little wary to get too close while that delicious band of skin was visible and drawing my eyes like a very stupid moth to a very hot, sexually compatible flame. Not that holding myself back would do me any good. The demon could crook their finger and I'd crawl right into their lap.

Poison tossed the tablet aside and held up the deck of cards, a sly grin curling their lips. "If you have the brain for it we could play a little game instead? It'd be quicker than a movie."

I bounced on my bed as I flopped down, groaning as the pressure was taken off my battered back. "I didn't think you'd be interested in a game of Go Fish."

"Why not?" they asked, affronted.

"I don't know, you seem like you would be more interested in doing something outside."

"I mean... I would, but you're sore, and as much as I love watching movies with you, you should probably start thinking about how you can make deals to move up the class board."

I groaned. Did everyone in my life have to remind me about my problems?

I'd stalled at 1786 for two days now that the weekend had passed by, but it seems like it was only a temporary reprieve. I was down ten spots already tonight and the weekend scramble wasn't due to start until tomorrow after classes when I'd be free to make my own deals.

I chewed my thumbnail, worry settling over me like a dark cloud. "I have no idea what I'm going to do about that though. Warner told me that because I was on the prey team I'd move ranks if we won..."

"That's a big if. Our team isn't bad—don't get me wrong—but it's new. Most of our lineup graduated last year, it's why there are so many first years."

"Have you played before?"

“Since elementary school,” Poison said proudly, pounding their chest. “It’s the one time I get to use my ability for something other than sex. Plus, it kinda runs in the family. My sister plays for Seventh Circle United.”

“For *what*?” I asked, curling onto my side and propping my head up on the heel of my hand.

“It’s one of the professional level Kingdom teams. You’re a natural too, I didn’t even hear you coming Monday.” They ran a hand through their hair, making the black strands stand on end.

“Ah, well...” I trailed off, laughing awkwardly. “I have some transferable skills.”

“Shall we?” They shook the deck of cards, the cardstock rattling in the cardboard holder. “I was thinking we could play a game of memory.”

“As long as I can play laying down I don’t care.”

“Scooch up a bit then,”

I did as they asked, tossing my pillows over onto their bed. Poison spread the cards out in a random pattern on the mattress, lounging on its end.

“Wanna go first?”

“Of course I do,” they scoffed, a teasing grin spreading over their face. “Want to make a little bet on it? It won’t be official, of course, since you’re still on your stay of bargaining.”

The glitter of mischief in their dark eyes was tempting enough that I was likely to say yes to just about anything.

“I don’t think I have anything to offer you.”

“How about...” Poison trailed off as they looked away, pink tinging their cheeks. “How about a kiss?”

My face burned. “Okay.”

“What do you want if you win?”

I thought for a moment, but I knew the second they asked, I didn’t want anything from Poison. I just wanted *them*.

“How about a favour?”

“Deal,” Poison chirped, flipping the first set of cards; a six and a king.

After they flipped them back over, I flipped my first set—a pair of aces.

“Beginners luck,” Poison huffed as I flipped over another couple of cards. A jack and another king. “Ooooh, I’ve seen one of these...”

I flipped my cards back over as their fingers danced over the cards, looking for their discarded king from the previous round. They plucked the card from the pile, flipping the king back over that I'd just revealed. This went on for some time, the two of us relatively even for most of the match but with me in the lead by two points.

Poison's gaze was sharp on the remaining cards. They'd need to play this next turn nearly perfectly to beat me. And, if the hand that'd been playing with my fingers for half the game was any hint, they were pretty motivated to win that kiss.

My eyes were drooping with exhaustion, a mix of the late nights and early mornings catching up quick after spending the evening being pummelled into the dirt.

Fucking Guts.

I'd half dozed, leaning against Poison's warm shoulder when they flipped the last few sets of cards over, whooping with victory.

"That's checkmate, precious."

"That's a different game," I mumbled, stifling a yawn.

"Are you okay?" Poison asked, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

"Wiped."

"Maybe I should cash my prize later then, wouldn't want to you fall asleep mid-ki—"

My eyes snapped open and I grabbed the front of their shirt, tugging them forward to capture their lips in a searing kiss.

Santo Dio.

Poison's mouth was made for kissing.

Their lips moved against mine in a perfect balance of softness and intensity, devouring my mouth. Poison's hand found my jaw as my own dove into their hair, their fingers brushing at the sensitive skin near my ear and lighting a fire in my belly. Their tongue slid against my lips, begging for entry that I was almost too eager to provide. My tongue met theirs the moment our lips parted, chasing the taste of tobacco and mint from their mouth. I pulled away after a few more decadent presses of our lips, my mouth quirking into a smile.

"I don't like to have debts."

"Consider yourself paid in full," they breathed, pupils blown as their fingers played with the hem of my shorts. "You know—"

“Nope,” I said quickly, shuffling off my bed and escaping towards the bathroom. “You only bargained for a kiss, Poison. Besides, when I fuck you—”

I turned, looking at them over my shoulder with my hand white-knuckling the doorknob like it would save me from my raging libido and damp panties.

Did they have to look so edible? Their cheeks flushed with the desire that was tenting their low-slung sweatpants, taking every ounce of self-control I had not to crawl into their lap and... I shook my head, dislodging the naughty fantasy that had my fingers going slack.

I wouldn't budge on this.

We deserved more than a quick fuck on the tail end of a deal. They deserved more. A partner who saw them for who they were. Not just a stand-in for whoever they were fantasizing about.

“When I *fuck you*, Poison, it's not going to be part of some stupid bet.”

Their lips parted in surprise, blasé attitude cracking and turning to dust.

“What?” they rasped, their blue eyes going wide.

I shrugged a shoulder and ducked into the half bath, closing the door and leaning against it. It was the coward's way out but I couldn't take them looking at me like that.

Like I hung the moon and the stars.

TALON

ELEVEN

I was a free woman.

As of 12:37am I could make deals as I wished, putting me back in control of my fate.

It was... scarier than I thought it'd be.

Mouse invited me to go to the fights but I told her and Saint that I'd meet them there, eager to get a shower in after a gruelling day of classes and another prey practice. We had a game coming this weekend—that meant we all needed to be in top shape.

Which, obviously, meant extra practice.

I was so beat that when I dropped by the dorm for a shower I'd fallen asleep scrolling our school's Coffin feed—a sort of mix between Instagram and Twitter—trying to come up with an idea for my first deal.

Despite it being the only thing I'd thought about for seven days—Oh! And if Wes had managed to track down and murder every single O'Brian in the tri-state—I had nothing. No plan. No ideas.

A message bannered the top of my screen from Mouse, warning me that if I didn't reply soon she was going to assume that Kallum found me in a dark hallway and I groaned.

Took a nap. Lemme shower and I'll be there soon.

MOUSE

You already missed Riot, she left ages ago. Hurry up or you'll miss Gauntlet—he's pretty consistent.

I THREW my phone down onto the bed and hauled myself up, collecting a change of clothes from my trunk with a huff.

Maybe I'd enter the ring myself just to blow off some steam. Not against someone like Gauntlet—I saw that guy in passing in the library and I didn't have a death wish. But it wasn't that long ago that I was the heir to the Ricci crime empire. I could throw and take a punch like the best of them.

If you could even hit me.

The thought of a good fight put some bounce back into my step as I made my way to the showers down the hall. I nudged the door open with my hip, reaching to get the lights.

Surprise flickered through me when my fingers hit the switch, finding them on despite the darkness beyond.

"Hello?" My voice bounced off the walls, the sound of water hitting the tile floor my only response. "Is someone in here?"

Okay, yeah, Olivia. Just be the dumbest bitch in the horror movie and invite any old monster to come and fuck with you while you can't see.

The darkness seemed to swell momentarily, shifting and undulating until I could almost see through it like smoke. It hovered in the air and clung to the surfaces of the room, tangible in a way that ignited my damned curiosity too much for me to turn and walk away.

After my eyes had time to adjust I could see that in the room's middle, the cloud hanging thick and murky over her, Riot leaned heavily against the edge of the sinks. Her knuckles were white where she gripped the porcelain. Deep bruises, bite marks, and gashes covered her skin, dripping with blood and water. A towel was wrapped around her loosely, her other hand pressed hard to the floor.

The smoke from the room seemed to be pouring out of the tattoo on her back, arcing through the air on the steam from the shower. The combination blotted all but a trickle of the light from the bulbs overhead.

I took a step into the room, raising my hand to slowly drag my fingers through the dark aura. Before I made contact it shrank away, evading my touch. I chased it with my hand, wondering what kind of demon could create something like this.

Riot isn't a demon, I reminded myself, confusion knotting my brows together. *So then what—?*

Just as my fingers made contact with the smoke it hurtled backwards like it was in a vacuum, disappearing inside Riot's body. She groaned, her hand slipping from the sink.

That's when I saw it. The blood. Way too much of it pooled on the tiles of the bathroom from a large cut over her left eyebrow.

Her head hit the tiles with a loud smack. Too quick for me to do anything about it.

"Merda! Riot?! Are you okay?"

Riot didn't stir as I dashed to her side, dropping my bag to the floor with a clatter. I turned her onto her back to get a look at her face, my hands flying to her neck, searching for a pulse. After a few tense moments, the steady thrum of a heartbeat met my fingertips.

Relief sagged my shoulders.

I'd think about why we still had pulses later. The habit was comforting enough for now and it promised that I still had time to help her.

Wetting my towel with some warm water, I dabbed at the cut on her forehead. It was deeper than I'd liked, especially without having a med kit handy, but she'd live. Probably.

I held the cloth to the wound, applying pressure to stem the bleeding the best I could.

With her like this, it was hard to believe that a single look from Riot was enough to make people skitter away from her.

Mostly because she looked half a second away from being a corpse. But hey, we're all dead here anyway.

That was something we had in common, right? We'd both been people once.

I brushed the long, dark strands of her hair away from where they clung to her face, my fingers coming away slick with blood and water.

"What the fuck happened to you?" I asked aloud, though there was little chance I'd get a reply.

Riot's lips twitched in response. Her eyes were still shut, dark lashes resting against her too-pale cheek.

She was beautiful when she wasn't trying to run away from me.

I inspected her the best I could while trying to be respectful of the fact that she was in a towel. Scrapes, cuts, burns, and a mural of bruises in an impressive array of colours covered her from head to toe like she'd been through hell and back. For all I knew, maybe she had.

Mouse did say she'd been fighting tonight. Was this what I could expect if I set foot in the ring myself? It was enough to make me think twice about putting my name on the ballot.

Ice, some stitches, and rest would likely cure most of it, especially if I could get Dice to help me carry her to the Nurse's office for actual healing.

I opened the cupboards under the sink, sifting through backup toilet paper and cleaning supplies for janitors that I'd never seen until I found what I was hunting for: a first aid kit.

I'd found a number of these kits stowed away under all kinds of bathroom sinks. Perfect for quick patch-ups when a job didn't go to plan. Leaving a trail of blood for the cops or rivals to follow wasn't exactly good business.

The kit itself was basic. I thumbed through the supplies inside—scissors, thread, needles, antiseptic, cotton pads, gauze, bandaids, burn cream—with a frustrated sigh.

I hated this part. It was gross as fuck. But there was no time to be a baby while your famiglia was bleeding out. I started with the antiseptic, carefully applying it to the wounds and wincing on Riot's behalf. It was probably a good thing she'd knocked herself out on the tiles. This was all going to hurt like a bitch.

Threading a needle, I made quick work of the stitches in her head, moving onto some of the deep cuts on her arms and chest that would need a bit of extra help to heal. Glue would've worked fine, but given I didn't have any, she'd have to deal with my clumsy needlework.

I wondered what she'd done to get here, and how she'd managed to gain the respect of everyone so quickly. Maybe it had something to do with whatever had moved her rank... But damn, if only I had half the street cred she did I'd be doing way better than I was.

I tied off the ends of the thread with a wince and tossed the needle into the sink above, moving onto applying ointment and bandages to the worst of her burns. Every so often, I checked her pulse. Her stillness during the process was almost as unnerving as the charred bits of her flesh.

Once I finished, a new challenge presented itself.

How was I supposed to get her out of the bathroom and into the dorm?

"Any chance you want to wake up now?" I asked skeptically.

Unsurprisingly, there was no reply.

Awesome.

I dug through my bag, finding the crop top and stretchy leggings that I'd planned to wear out tonight. With some difficulty I wrestled Riot into the outfit, deciding that my respectful, clinical dressing was probably better than chancing that the damn towel would stay on while I tried to carry—likely drag—her back to our dorm.

With a grunt of effort, I hauled Riot up from the floor, her dead weight nearly taking me down with her. I hooked my arms under her armpits, dragging her out of the bathroom and into the hallway.

Thank you, hardwood! I cheered internally that I didn't have to fight the drag of carpet with each laboured step towards our door.

After a lot of pulling, cursing, and nearly falling flat on my face, I'd managed to wrestle Riot down the hall, through the door of our dorm, and into her own bed. I collapsed on the carpet of our room, sweaty and breathing hard.

"You know," I said aloud, knowing I'd get no response, "this was a lot of effort for someone who's going to pretend I don't exist tomorrow."

"You exist," Riot muttered on a wheeze.

I sat bolt upright. My eyes seeking hers wildly and finding them closed. "What was that?"

No response.

Typical.

I'd likely imagined that she'd spoken at all.

I pushed myself off the floor, checking that my clumsy carrying didn't dislodge Riot's stitches. Satisfied, I drew her bed curtains, leaving them just open enough that I'd be able to check on her from the comfort of my own bed.

I'd need to make sure she was still breathing—*Could dead people get concussions?*—so I grabbed my phone, finding a message from Mouse letting me know they were heading back to the dorm.

It was nearly two in the morning.

I sent her a half-hearted apology and set an alarm to check on Riot, ditching my bloody clothes for my pyjamas before crawling into bed.

I'd make it up to Mouse and Saint next time. For now, tomorrow's study date was going to be absolutely miserable if I didn't try to get at least a little sleep.

With one last look at Riot—holding my breath until I saw the slow rise and fall of her chest—I pulled the covers tight around myself and shut my eyes.

I WHINED when my alarm went off, rolling onto my belly and pulling my pillow over my head. I couldn't have been asleep much longer than a couple of minutes after I'd gotten up with the sun to check on Riot.

Riot.

I shot up in my bed, looking through the gap in my heavy hangings into Riot's *empty* bed. With an eye roll and a few spiteful words I turned my alarm off and flopped back down against the pillows, rubbing my hands over my face in irritation.

Of course, she wouldn't say thank you. That would mean she'd have to actually acknowledge me.

"Precious, that you?" Poison called sleepily.

"Yeah, sorry. I have an early thing today."

Their rumpled head poked through my curtains a few moments later, a tired smile pulling at the corners of their mouth. "Missed you last night."

"I got caught up." I mumbled, fighting a smile.

"Can I come in for a bit? How early is your thing?"

Poison was always gorgeous. That wasn't up for debate so long as you had eyes, but first thing in the morning, their hair a mess, eyes still heavy with sleep and seeking cuddles? They were *adorable*.

"Yeah, It's supposed to be in an hour but I can go a little later." I moved over, holding the blankets up in invitation.

Poison climbed in and I curled into their side, pressing a quick kiss to their cheek.

I sent a text to Saint, asking to push our study date back an hour so I could catch up on some sleep and dropped my phone on the bed beside Poison without waiting for a reply. There was no way that we'd get anything done if I didn't get another thirty minutes rest anyway. My brain was goo.

"Have fun last night?"

“Shhh,” they murmured, wrapping their arms around me tightly. “I’m sleepy.”

I grinned into their chest, caught in how ridiculous this situation was.

Lounging on the first lazy Saturday morning I’d had in years with a literal demon as my bedmate.

A demon that had quickly gone from *a* monster to *my* monster.

Even if I wasn’t quite ready to talk about that yet.

I dozed for a while, listening to Poison’s deep, even breathing and the sounds of the campus waking up. Given the late night, it was a bit of a surprise that so many bodies were up and moving before noon.

No rest for the wicked, a voice that sounded far too much like Penny snarked.

Poison stirred as my alarm went off again, warning me that my hour-long extension was coming to a close.

“No way,” they complained. “What if we have a date today instead?”

“Saint and I have a group project,” I shot back as they rolled on top of me, pressing their thigh between my legs invitingly.

“Is there anything I can do to persuade you, precious?”

“Nope,” I replied, popping the ‘p’.

Their lips pulled into a pout and I gave in to the impulse to kiss it away, our mouths slotting together so perfectly it made my heartbeat pick up. “Mouse and I have plans to hang out tonight. Do you want to tag along?”

Poison hummed as we traded a few more drugging kisses, taking our time as we experimented with each other’s mouths. “Alright.”

The last time we’d kissed it’d been part of a bet—but there was no wager between us now, only the low hum of arousal that warmed my belly with each pass of our lips.

“Are you going to let me get up?” I asked, stroking a hand down their bare back. Had they been shirtless when they’d gotten into bed? I’d been so tired that I didn’t notice. But now that I was awake, yeah, I was *fucking* noticing.

“Five minutes?” they bargained, nipping my bottom lip before laving their tongue over the little hurt.

I nodded enthusiastically. Saint could wait. It wasn’t like we needed to finish the presentation *today* anyway.

I grinned against Poison's mouth, walking my fingers to rest on the small of their back. "You are very good at this."

"I would hope so," they replied with a low laugh, their fingers threading into my tangled hair and gently teasing out the knots. "You know, five minutes is more than enough time for me to make you come."

Their suggestive tone *almost* made me say yes. But I'd decided this the night we kissed. The first time we had sex, I wanted it to mean something. There was so much more to Poison than who they could be between my sheets.

I bit my lip, looking up into their stormy eyes as they hovered over me. "I actually thought we could take things slow, if that's okay?" I looped my arms around their neck, offering a nibbling kiss against their upper lip.

Poison's brows drew together in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I mean..." I hesitated, resisting the urge to look away as embarrassment pinked my cheeks, "that we could wait a while before we have sex."

"Why would you want to do that?" they laughed. "You know what I am, what I do—If you're worried about STDs that's not really—"

"Oh my god," I whined, clapping my hand over their mouth. "That is so not what I was thinking." I let them peel away my fingers, bringing them back to their lips for a gentle kiss that made the tips tingle. "I just want to go at our own pace, okay?"

"Our own pace," they repeated, their eyes soft as they studied my face. "That sounds nice, precious."

"Good." I grinned. "Now enough talking, more kissing—I don't have long."

Poison matched my smile with one of their own, the lofty rumble of their laugh shaking us both. "You're kinda bossy."

"Kinda? Sweetheart, I'm the only daughter in two generations of Italian Americans. I'm majorly bossy."

My phone buzzed and I groaned. Poison grinned, bringing their lips to mine for a few more quick pecks.

"Go on, I'll settle in for the show while you get dressed."

"Oh will you?"

"Sure will," they patted my side, shifting so I could slide out of bed and pull the curtains open.

Poison lounged against my pillows, their gaze scorching where it met my skin. I grabbed a fresh set of clothes from my trunk and shed my pyjamas, pulled on a lacy bralette and matching thong, looking over my shoulder to meet Poison's hooded gaze.

"You're killing me."

"Am I?" I asked coyly, shrugging into my button down and slowly doing it up.

"Yes," they breathed wistfully.

I stepped into my skirt and pulled it up my legs, zipping the side so it fit snugly at my hips. "You've never had to wait before, have you?" I asked, making quick work of my tie and grabbing my bag.

"No," they groaned, shifting on the bed.

"You'll live," I assured them, stepping into my shoes. "See you later?" I leaned forward for a slow kiss, my resolve crumbling with each passing second.

Spending all day in bed with Poison sounded like a way better day than hanging out in the dusty library.

"Mhm," Poison murmured against my mouth, handing me my phone.

I tried and failed not to look at the sizable bulge in their sleep pants, feeling my face heat.

"If you're going to jerk off, can you do it in your own bed?" I asked, my voice a little higher than usual. I'd never thought of someone getting off thinking about me as sexy before, but if I knew Poison was languishing in my bed, stroking their cock to thoughts of me... No studying would be getting done.

Their returning laugh was deep and full of lust. "But this one smells like *you*."

I snatched a pillow off their bed, throwing it at their head on my way out the door. Poison's laughter could be heard the whole way down the hall until the doors of the elevator slid shut.

Downstairs, I wove through students, Mouse was at our usual table, her fingers flying over the magnetically attached keyboard of her tablet.

"Morning," she muttered, her eyes glued to the screen.

"Something big happen last night?" I asked, my eyes seeking out the centre table of their own accord.

Riot's honey-oak coloured eyes met my gaze blankly, not a hint of recognition on her face. It was just as well, I wasn't sure what a grateful

Riot was supposed to look like anyway.

"I should be asking you that, shouldn't I?" Mouse asked, raising an eyebrow as I slid into the seat beside her.

"Honestly, I don't know if you'd believe me if I even told you."

"Fair enough," she looked up at me, flashing a quick smile. "I won big last night. Saint too. The guy's a natural. Already in the top fifty percent."

"Oh rub it in," I groaned.

"I think I will, yeah."

"What time did you get back?"

"Late," she replied, tapping her fingers against the tabletop. "Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot." I swiped up her coffee mug, taking a sip.

"Lucky—" Mouse brought her lip between her teeth. "How exactly did you kill him?"

The stolen coffee promptly went down the wrong hole. "What? Why do you want to know?" I choked, thumping my chest with my fist.

"I have a working theory. Dude hates water. Even the rain makes him uncomfortable."

"How much is information like that worth?"

"Maybe nothing, maybe something. Depends on who, if anyone, wants it."

Dice claimed the seat beside me, leaning his chin on one of his hands. "Morning, topsiders."

"Morning," Mouse said in a clipped tone, her eyes going returning to her tablet.

"Morning," I echoed.

"Have you come up with your first bet yet?" Dice asked, looking at me curiously. "I thought maybe since you were M.I.A. last night you'd already made one, but there was nothing in the logs."

I opened my mouth to reply when a plate of toast with a generous helping of raspberry jam clattered down in front of me, followed shortly by a steaming cup of coffee. I looked up in surprise, finding Riot's back already to us as she stormed towards her usual table.

Mouse's eyes rounded into saucers. "What was that?"

"What was... what?" I hedged, looking at the plate in confusion.

"It was you that she was with last night?" Dice asked incredulously, his eyebrows nearly disappearing into his hairline.

“What?” Mouse barked, closing her keyboard with a crash. “You blew me off to hang out with *Riot*?!”

“We weren’t—I didn’t—It wasn’t like that,” I rushed out. “I found her bleeding out in the bathroom and patched her up. It was no big deal.”

Dice scoffed, studying the coffee and toast with so much interest it could have been a recently discovered ancient artifact. “This is uncharted territory,” he muttered, seemingly to himself.

“Seems like it was a pretty big deal to her,” Mouse mused, taking a picture on her phone. “Go on, tell me everything.”

“You are *not* information brokering my breakfast,” I snapped, pointing a finger at her. “Leave it alone. I patched her up. She was gone this morning. This is likely a thank you. End of story.”

“*End of story*,” scoffed Dice, pushing the long top section of his hair back to reveal the carefully maintained undercut beneath. “Doubtful.”

“Shouldn’t you be badgering me about my fucking deal plans or something?”

Dice laughed, lounging back in his chair until two feet tipped up off the floor. A demoness with a skirt rolled so high that I could practically see her panties passed by, laughing with a girlfriend, and his attention fragmented, eyes following her bare thighs for a few seconds too long.

I scoffed and he cleared his throat, bringing his focus back to the table. “That eager to discuss it?”

The idea I’d been toying with solidified. At first, it was kind of a joke. Overly simple, a bit cliché, but effective.

In the last week, I’d never seen Dice with the same girl twice. Sometimes more than one within twenty-four hours. He was burning through our female classmates like a match and gasoline.

“I think so,” I hedged, glancing at Mouse who was resolutely pretending she wasn’t taking notes of our conversation on her phone.

Dice’s eyes twinkled with interest as he leaned forward. “And?”

I mulled the phrasing over in my mind.

“I bet that you can’t make a single person at this academy believe that you’re in love with me by the end of the year.”

There was a crash as the front legs of Dice’s chair met the floor, his massive palms slapping down onto the tabletop. His shoulders were shaking and I realised, a beat too late, it was with laughter.

Mouse, on the other hand, cleared her throat importantly.

“The school year, to be clear.” I rushed out quickly and she flashed a thumbs-up.

“You don’t think I could convince *one* of the idiots at this school that *we’re together?*”

“Not together, *in love*. I’ve seen how you operate. Different girl every day, sometimes every hour. I don’t think you have the attention span for one woman.”

Dice narrowed his eyes at me, and even as I knew he would agree, I could see him working out the terms. “And if you win, what do you get?”

“I want to be in the top ten. So as many rank points as I need at the end of the year to get me there.”

He considered this a moment, taking out his phone and looking at his current ranking.

It was all for show. From what I’d seen, Dice was a compulsive gambler; even if my stakes would lead him to ruin he’d make my deal.

Plus, the cocksure idiot would never consider that he’d actually *lose*.

“Pretty high stakes for me.”

I shrugged a shoulder. “Call it an insurance policy. I don’t plan on needing the ranks—but I like having an ace in my pocket.”

Dice’s eyes flicked to Riot across the room, who was sitting as still as a statue with her jaw tight and angry.

“If I win...” He started slowly, drumming his fingers on the scrubbed wood. “You’ll be my pet for the next semester.”

“Pet?” I asked, my brows pulling together. I had no idea what that could possibly mean.

“If you’re so sure you’ll win, do you really want me to explain it to you?”

I clenched my jaw, offering my hand. “Good point, a player like you? No one will ever believe it. But—you immediately forfeit if you actually fall for me,” I teased.

“Fine, same for you,” Dice laughed, his warm hand clapping into mine and sealing our contract.

As I moved to pull my hand away he enveloped it in both of his, tugging me sharply so I was leaning close to his face. Dice bent and brushed his lips against my ear, his hot breath making me shiver.

“Hope you like wearing a collar, Talon.”

I opened my mouth to retort but my attention was drawn to Riot who'd knocked her tray to the floor, her chest heaving as she stared at us. "Are you fucking kidding me, Dice?"

He let go of my hand, scratching at his short five o'clock shadow. "Jealous, Riot?"

Riot growled, her dark eyes flitting to me. "You're a fucking idiot," she snapped, storming out of the hall with her shoulders at her ears, students shrinking away in the wake of her anger.

The three of us stared after her, open-mouthed.

"What was that?" Mouse asked in a low voice.

Dice recovered the quickest, shaking off his surprise. "I knew I'd make a few enemies—bagging the hottest girl on campus—just didn't expect it to be so fast."

I scoffed. "Yeah, okay, *babe*," I drawled the word like a curse. "Walk me to the library? I'm meeting a friend to study, if I don't get some help in arithmancy I'm going to flunk out."

Problem one, I need a deal I know I can win. *Check*.

Problem two, I need someone to keep me safe from Kallum. *Check again*.

Dice scooped up my bag, a wicked smile curving his handsome mouth. "Anything for *my girl*."

Problem three, don't fall for the asshole you made a bet with. The jury's out on that one but unless there was some secret depth to this giant playboy—*Check*. Probably.

SAINT

TWELVE

There were many things about Underworld University that I found strange and exciting.

First, the architecture was so unlike that in the Golden City—Here everything was mostly made of imposing, cold stones carved into intricate designs of monsters, and was gothic in a way that felt natural to the place.

Second, its inhabitants. In Heaven, most everyone was generally agreeable. But here? A student was more likely to start a fight with you than seek compromise. Their communication was so much more physical than what I was accustomed to. Even more than humans.

I was different here too, and not just the way that my ruined back ached—soul deep. Being unable to fly was a lot like trimming the claws of a cat. It left me vulnerable and anxious.

The view of the sky from the arched windows acted as a sort of twofold torture. The vibrant red hue reminded me of where I was. The purple and grey clouds a twisted siren call for wings that I'd never soar on again.

"Let's have dinner together," a familiar, gravelly voice asked from behind. I turned in the uncomfortable wooden chair, catching sight of Dice leaning over Olivia. His forearm rested against the doorframe, but instead of the blasè, irritated look I'd come to expect whenever the pair interacted, mirth lit in her dark eyes.

"Only if you sit at my table," she said, taking her bag from Dice's other hand.

“Consider it done.” He grinned, leaning in close to brush his lips against her ear. I didn’t hear what he said, but Olivia stiffened before pulling away.

When she turned to me, the smile on her face felt pasted on, brittle. The way it’d been for months after I led her to the truth about Kallum.

If I’d known what would happen next, I never would have pushed her to find out. Better for her to be in prison. But hindsight was 20/20, and how was I supposed to know how much things would change after she killed her former boyfriend.

“Sorry I’m late,” Olivia said, sitting across from me at the long wooden table with a grin that made the butterflies that’d taken up residence in my stomach riot.

“Don’t worry about it. Did you get the rest you needed?”

It’d taken a lot of getting used to, having her be able to see me now. I’d only been watching her a few years—once her previous guardian had been reassigned. But even so, there wasn’t a number for all the times I wished I could have appeared for her.

Secrecy orders be damned, Olivia—Talon as she was known to me now—had a knack for finding trouble.

It was undoubtedly my father’s idea of a sick joke that he’d sent me here knowing she would be a student. Poetic justice that I was just as bound by his asinine rules here as I was on Earth.

At least she didn’t remember me, as far as I could tell.

I’d been weak—blinded by a fruitless, one-sided crush—when I revealed myself to her in that alley. Something that I’d never be able to take back.

Not that I particularly wanted to, as I watched her pull her tablet from her bag and connect the magnetic keyboard, a deep blush crawling up the back of her neck.

“Yup—I—it’s been a hard week,” she met my eye for a moment before she started tapping away on her keyboard. “Mouse told me you cleaned up last night?”

My eyes went to where the little silver pin had been glinting on Talon’s chest for the last week, now bare.

“Yeah, I suppose. I made a few lucky bets at the Pit. Have you made your first deal yet?”

“Yes,” she said, grinning. “Pretty sure I have it in the bag too.”

I blinked, stunned into silence for a moment by the way her face transformed, dark eyes crinkled at the corners from the way her cheeks bunched.

A smile. One for me alone.

I wished to capture the moment, to be able to watch it again and again.

“That’s excellent news. What was it?”

Her smile transformed, became sharper as her eyelashes batted flirtatiously. “A lady never tells, Saint. Should we get started? I don’t want to waste your whole day.” She tilted her head to the side, a waterfall of deliciously dark hair falling over her shoulder.

I blinked, my mouth totally dry.

Get it together, you pathetic excuse for a nephilim.

“Professor Brim assigned us Pandemonium—The capital,” I told her, pulling up my digitised textbook. “Did you complete the readings?”

“Barely,” she sighed, tapping along on her tablet for a few moments. “I don’t know how they expect us to keep up with all this homework.”

“Well it *is* supposed to be a punishment...”

Talon groaned, laying her head down on the table. “Don’t be reasonable, I want to complain!”

“Is it helping?” I asked, trying to stifle my smile. She was so... charming. Amusing.

“If I say yes will you let me continue?”

I chuckled. “Yes.”

“Then yes.” She giggled softly, pulling herself up to sit. “Okay, fine. No, let’s get this over with.”

“Jeeze, I’m so glad you love my stunning company.” I rolled my eyes.

“You know that’s not what I meant,” she protested hotly, her eyes catching mine for a long moment that had me clearing my throat.

“Yes, fine. What do you have?”

“I was thinking that we could do it as a sort of... advertisement. Pandemonium is supposed to be the most desirable of the circles, so a kind of spin-off infomercial?”

“Infomercial?” I asked, surprised.

“Yeah, you know—like an ad? It might make it more fun than if we presented the information like academics.” She turned the tablet towards me, flipping through clumsy sketches of a slideshow.

“He pissed you off, saying we were behind,” I said, mostly to myself.

“Absolutely.” She scowled. “We might be new, but we aren’t stupid. Before I died I was going to NYU—Oh, that probably doesn’t mean anything to you.”

“It’s a pretty good university, right?” I asked, watching as she tugged the tablet back, making some adjustments to her sketches with her lips pursed adorably.

“Yeah, I mean it isn’t an Ivy or anything, but it was still kinda hard to get in.”

“An Ivy?”

“Stupidly prestigious university that costs too much.”

“You didn’t want to go to one of those?”

“Fuck no, and I didn’t have the time for a lot of the extracurriculars that make those universities really fun anyway. My family life was really demanding.”

I laughed. Understatement of the century. “Fair enough. Why don’t you look at the labour structure and I’ll start on the imports and exports?”

“Works for me. Let’s go find some books.” She stood, wandering off towards the stacks and I followed closely behind as if drawn by an invisible thread.

It was foolish to let myself believe that we could be anything more than friends—dangerous. Because once she knew who I was, what I was, and what I’d done? All the flirty smiles and easy laughs were sure to transform into anger and disappointment.

It was my fault she’d died, after all.

TALON and I worked until the late afternoon sun was pouring through the arched windows, leaving sunbeams across the dusty pages of our books.

She stretched her arms above her head, tangling her fingers together as she popped her back. “This is taking forever.”

“It’s supposed to be an end-of-term project. We don’t have to do it all today.”

“But Sai—” her words cut off abruptly as she stiffened, her eyes laser-focusing on something behind my shoulder.

If I didn’t know better, I’d think she was afraid.

“Baby,” Kallum—Lucky—I reminded myself with a grimace, called, meeting us where we sat.

Talon slid her tablet into her bag, standing from the table. “I go by Talon now, or did you forget?”

“Oh I know,” he leered, running a hand through his copper hair. “But I can’t resist how it bothers you.” His cold eyes flicked to me dismissively. “And you are?”

“No one,” snapped Talon before I could reply. “I have to meet Dice for dinner.”

“Well, *run* along.” Lucky grinned. “I was just coming to tell you that whatever you’ve cooked up with the giant simpleton isn’t going to work.”

She scoffed. “I’m not cooking anything up.”

“Oh please,” Lucky slammed his hand down on the table. “As if *Dice* never fucks them twice *suddenly* decided he needed a girlfriend. Much less a girlfriend like *you*.”

“What?” I asked, looking between the two of them. “*Girlfriend?*”

“Sorry, *no one*, forgot you were there,” the redhead drawled. “If you were hoping for an easy lay it looks like that window closed.”

Talon’s lip curled. “I don’t see how any of this is your business,” she snapped, her voice quieting. “The next time you come to threaten me, I’ll make sure I rip that eye of yours out at the root, O’Brian.”

I pressed my lips together, trying to stifle a laugh. It wasn’t that it was particularly funny, just the situation itself was ludicrous.

For the first time, I could actually do something to help Olivia and she’d know it was me doing it. Of course, that had to be when she didn’t need my help at all.

I stood from my seat, towering over Kallum. “See you later, Talon.”

She took the invitation to leave with a grateful smile, disappearing into the hall.

My fingers dug into Kallum’s shoulder as he tried to follow her.

Now that I wasn’t in danger of expulsion, I was free and clear to make a few key deals in order to make her life easier.

Maybe it was foolishness—but I felt responsible for Talon. If it was my fault she was here, the least I could do would be to make sure she was safe from creeps like Kallum. I had a feeling that if he was willing to assault her in the middle of class there were few boundaries he wouldn’t cross. The idea made me sick, that she could suffer at his unworthy hands.

“You and I are going to have a little talk, Lucky. What do you say about making a wager?”

Kallum’s shrewd eyes looked between me and the door Talon had escaped through. “What kind of wager?”

“The kind where you leave her alone.”

Kallum laughed, shrugging off my hand. “You’re meddling in something you don’t know shit about, Saint. Trust me, whatever she’s told you to wrap her around her finger, she tried that with me once too. The pussy ain’t worth it.”

Fury licked up my spine, my hands fisting at my sides.

“You have no right to talk about her like that.”

“Whatever,” he scoffed. “I think I know her quite a bit better than you.”

“I want you to leave her alone.”

“Tall order; going to need something really good for that.” He scratched at the uneven stubble on his chin as he thought. “I’d leave her alone for...” he mused, taking his time.

It made sense, what would be more valuable to this bastard than revenge? Little.

“Today, Lucky,” I growled.

He snapped his fingers as the idea came to him. “A favour. No questions asked. No bullshit. The winner can be decided by the outcome of the next prey match. If we win, I’ll leave her be.”

I offered him my hand, rolling the terms over in my mind. “The favour can’t be to harm her.”

“Sure,” Lucky agreed, taking my hand. “We win, I leave her be. We lose, and you owe me one favour, limited to not being able to harm *Talon*,” he spat the name furiously. “Directly.”

Too easy.

Kallum O’Brian wasn’t near smart enough to force me to do something I didn’t want to do. He’d have to phrase his request extremely carefully.

“It’s a deal.” I gripped his hand hard enough to grind the bones together. “And until the match, you’ll leave her alone or immediately forfeit this deal.”

There wasn’t much he could do on the pitch with her, not with the entire school watching. Even Kallum wasn’t crazy enough to attack her with that many witnesses. Was he?

Kallum growled as I released him. “A lot of effort for someone who doesn’t want you, buddy.”

I bristled. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“Sure I don’t.” He rolled his eyes. “That girl is a black widow, but I’m sure you’ll figure that out soon enough.”

I grabbed my stuff and walked out of the library without another word. I didn’t need to explain myself to *him*.

With enough time, Talon would grow to return my feelings. I knew it.

TALON

THIRTEEN

Monday came too soon.

Dice appeared at my door and escorted me to breakfast, taking the time to collect plates for himself and his usual crowd—which he delivered with a truly spectacular amount of fanfare—before joining us at our table.

To his credit, since we'd made our deal I hadn't seen him with anyone else. Sure, that was less than forty-eight hours ago, but it was something.

"So what's the deal?" asked Spinner, shovelling scrambled eggs into his mouth.

"What do you mean?" Dice asked lazily, cutting a strip off his grilled ham and offering it to me on his fork.

I waved it off. I wasn't much of a breakfast-eater save for a pastry or a piece of toast with—

A plate with two raspberry jam-coated pieces of toast hit the table in front of me, followed shortly by an iced latte in a fancy glass cup with a lid.

"I tried those bottled ones you've been drinking—they're *disgusting*," Riot said flatly, her lip curling. "This will taste better."

"T-t-thank you," I stammered, my cheeks heating under her intense stare.

"Try it," she demanded, pushing the cup closer to my hand.

I picked up the cup and brought the straw to my lips for a sip. The drink sang across my tongue, rich with espresso, a little sweet with a hint of nuttiness that made for the perfect combination of flavours. My eyes widened in surprise and I took another long drink.

“Do you like it?” she asked softly, her voice holding a thread of humour.

“It’s amazing! Did you make this?”

She nodded, a slow smile replacing her trademark scowl.

“Want to join us Riot?” Dice offered. “You can be a member of the harem too.”

“The *what?*” I asked, taken aback.

Riot’s expression shuttered.

“Harem,” Dice repeated like I was the one who was being stupid. “You know, what humans call it when one person dates many others.”

“It’s called polyamory, idiot,” Mouse muttered, dipping her toast into the jammy yolk of her egg. “No one calls it a harem anymore.”

Riot looked around at us all blankly, like the conversation barely held her interest. “I’ll see you in class, Talon.”

“Aw, come on!” Dice pressed as Poison took the free seat on my right. “You know you want to.”

“If I wanted to,” she snapped at Dice, her honey-brown eyes meeting purple, “I’d fucking do it without your opinion.” Riot turned on her heel, her long ponytail swinging behind her as she stormed off to sit beside Wrath.

“Joining us again?” Poison asked Dice, swiping a piece of my toast.

“Hey!” I complained.

They smiled in an embarrassed sort of way, pressing a quick kiss to the corner of my mouth. “Sorry, bad habits and all that.”

I took another drink of my latte, a little touched that Riot went out of her way to make it. This was infinitely better than the bottled stuff. “Fine, but you owe me.”

“Anything in particular you’d like? We could always pick up where we left off yesterday morning when—” Poison leaned in close, their voice dropping as they moved to speak against my ear.

“Hey, dickhead, that’s my girlfriend you’re talking about.”

They froze. “Girlfriend? What’s he talking about, precious?”

“Well—I—”

Fuck. I absolutely hadn’t considered how I would explain any of this to my friends. Much less my—well Poison was—

“I’m tired of bouncing around so much,” Dice drawled, leaning an arm around the back of my chair. “I asked Talon yesterday if she’d like to go

out and she said yes. Is that a problem, *shapeshifter*?”

“We aren’t exclusive!” I blurted as Poison’s eyebrows drew together. “It has zero impact on our—on us, I mean.”

Their navy eyes flicked between the pair of us.

“They’re telling the truth, unfortunately,” Mouse said.

Spinner looked between the three of us. “This is way too many feelings for before breakfast. I’ll see you later, Boss.” He left his plate behind as he rose, disappearing into the crowd.

“I hope you like to share,” Poison said smoothly, taking a bite of their stolen toast. “Because I won’t be going anywhere.”

“Of course,” Dice replied cheerfully, giving me a quick kiss on the cheek. “I need to get to class. I’ll see you in gym, Talon.”

“See you,” I called, wishing the floor would swallow me up.

“Well, that was—” Mouse started and I kicked her under the table. She yelped and glared in my direction. “You didn’t let me finish!”

“That’s not how I wanted you to find out,” I said, reaching forward and brushing a smear of jam from the corner of Poison’s mouth with my thumb.

“I’m cool with it,” Poison said, grabbing my hand and sucking the sticky spread off the pad of my finger. “I meant what I said about sharing, though.” They leaned forward, dropping their voice so Mouse couldn’t hear, “I wonder how prettily you’ll scream for me while he watches.”

My lips popped open in surprise, a wave of arousal crashing over me as the image formed in my mind.

It wasn’t real.

But I’d be a liar if I said I wasn’t suddenly wishing that it was.

POISON and I kissed a little longer than was strictly appropriate when they dropped me off in front of Professor Brim’s classroom. When we finally parted—leaving me wondering whether or not my grades could withstand ditching class—I wandered half-dazed into the room.

No matter how much I thought about him, it was still jarring to see Kallum sitting in the back row, his expression flat as he met my gaze. I

fought the urge to avert my eyes, staring him down until I reached the first row of desks, breaking our contest to take my seat.

Riot scowled, her full upper lip curled with irritation. “Is he bothering you?”

“No,” I said too quickly, busying myself with pulling out my tablet and books.

“I’ll kill him if he is.”

“We’re already dead,” I muttered, hanging my bag off of the back of my chair.

Letting Riot get involved would be bad form after I’d already tricked Dice into being my bodyguard until the end of the year. I could still hold my own, I just needed a little backup.

“Some of us more than others,” Riot replied through gritted teeth, tapping her pen against the desk.

I tucked a piece of hair behind my ear, looking at her sidelong. Riot’s tie was loose around her neck, the buttons of her top undone for a peek at her tanned skin.

In our limited interactions, she’d been standoffish at best, but since I’d patched her up in the bathroom it’s like she’d warmed up to me a little. If she was feeling some kind of misplaced gratitude I was happy to lap up the attention it earned.

Riot was... Thoughtful in a way I didn’t expect. And beautiful. Her honey-brown eyes and long, dark hair were the things men wrote songs about. And that tattoo on her back? Merda. I was in *trouble*.

“Thank you for breakfast,” I murmured, my tongue thick in my mouth.

Her eyes met mine for a moment, one of her shoulders shrugging casually. “It’s nothing.”

I hummed noncommittally, pulling up Dice’s Coffin account and browsing through his recent tags. Since news broke this morning of our ‘*relationship*’ the usual sycophantic flock hadn’t changed, commenting on his selfies in desperate droves.

“What’s this?”

“Just checking to see if he’s posted anything new.”

Not entirely true, but not entirely a lie either. It was more like I wanted to see if any of Dice’s fan club actually believed he liked me. Based on the

comments that was a resounding *no*. Fine by me, it would make this thing a breeze to win if he couldn't convince them that I was worth his time.

Riot raised a finely manicured eyebrow. "If you needed to win some rank points you could've always bet on me in the ring."

"Yeah, okay, like I didn't meet you for the first time half-dead after a huge loss. Wait—" I leaned towards her and dropped my voice. "How'd you know it was a deal?"

"You just told me." She smirked, leaning back in her chair in such a Dice-like move that it almost made me laugh. "Besides, that barely ever happens."

"Well, I can't take that chance," I said, shaking my head.

She'd fucking played me. I'd walked right into her line of questioning without thinking.

I should've been upset. Or at the very least annoyed. I definitely shouldn't have been impressed.

Merda.

Riot was cute when she was smug.

I'd capped out at about rank 1643 over the weekend, still a far cry from the top fifty percent. But, at least I was moving in the right direction. Even if it was the misfortune of others pushing my rank up the board.

"So," Riot hesitated like she already regretted asking, her pen twirling in her fingers, "what *is* your deal with him anyway?"

I bit my lip, looking down at Dice's flexed mirror photo with heat creeping up the back of my neck. Riot was Dice's best friend; I didn't think she'd be thrilled that I was basically going to use his own playboy status and wandering cock against him.

"It's a secret?" I offered lamely.

Riot's hand landed on the inside of my knee, her long fingers curving inwards with a possessive hold. "Tell me."

I snapped my legs together without thinking, trapping her hand between my thighs.

Her smile was lecherous as she slid her fingers purposefully towards my core, teasing at the sensitive skin with her short nails. "Talon," she purred, leaning so that she was speaking into my ear. "What's the deal?"

"I—"

Riot's fingers traced patterns as she slowly moved her hand further into the fabric of my skirt, toying with the sensitive skin of my inner

thigh.

My thighs relaxed a little and Riot's fingers found the edge of my panties. Under the desk, no one could see what we were doing, it looked like she'd leaned in to look at something on my tablet. She crooked her fingers, brushing them down the expanse of my pussy through the fabric purposefully.

I had to stifle a moan in the back of my throat.

With all the time I was spending with a sex demon, I'd think that I'd be satisfied, but since Poison and I hadn't taken our physical relationship any further than kissing I was pathetically needy.

Especially when the buttons of Riot's top were undone to the point that I could see the edge of her lacy bralette at this angle. My eyes lingered on her exposed cleavage and I licked my lips—our conversation lost in desperate, wanting brain fog.

She circled my clit through the thin material and I clenched my teeth.

"Tell me," she demanded, her breath hot against my neck.

If I turned my face we'd be kissing. But then the game would be over.

"Talon," she warned, her hand shifting to grip my inner thigh.

"Right," I muttered, able to think more clearly without her toying with me.

What if she told everyone my plan and fucked it all up for me? It's not like we were anything. Hardly even friends, regardless of the fact that I'd all but saved her life. And whatever it was that we were doing *right now*.

"Well?" she urged, finding the edge of my panties again and teasing her fingers underneath to my core.

I breathed in sharply through my teeth. Sure, the fantasy of being fucked in a room full of people was exciting—but the reality was a bit much for a Monday morning.

"Dice gave me a free shot at him!" I rushed out. "And since he's well—*Dice*—I thought I'd make a wager I was sure to win." I lowered my voice so that it was barely a whisper, overly aware of the people around us. "We aren't really together. It's just a deal."

I don't know why I told her the truth. Maybe I wasn't thinking clearly with her hand getting closer and closer to my damp pussy. Maybe I needed someone to know that it wasn't real between Dice and me.

Riot's fingers stilled for a fraction of a second before she gripped my thigh hard enough to make me yelp. My skin burned when I felt my

classmates' eyes suddenly on us at the noise. The fury in Riot's gaze was enough to shift my feelings from embarrassment to fear.

"Why the fuck would you do that?" she snapped, her face a fraction of an inch from mine.

"Because I know I'll win," I breathed, my heart pounding in my chest. "No one will ever believe it."

Riot jerked upright, her desk overturning in her haste with a loud bang. "That's the stupidest fucking thing I've ever heard."

"I didn't have any other ideas," I gritted out, my face flaming.

Riot gripped my chin, her eyes narrowed as she leaned close to my face. "Figure it out. But don't—not with—not when—"

I slapped her hand away, finally losing my cool.

No one fucking manhandled me, especially not in front of a room full of people. Double especially if that room full of people included Kallum.

"If it's so easy, why don't you come up with something?"

"Maybe if you didn't waste your time with losers you'd be able to put that brain of yours to good use!" she shouted, dark eyes flashing when Professor Brim walked into the room, his eyes sliding over the pair of us and our hushed classmates with an irritated gleam.

"Are you quite done destroying my classroom?" he asked, quiet and lethal.

Riot turned her fury on him, grabbing her bag and clearing her upturned desk with a single, graceful jump. "Fuck off, old man," she snapped, finding that her dramatic exit was impeded by Saint in the doorway. She shoulder-checked him aside, storming into the hall and disappearing around the corner.

My jaw hung open in shock.

What in the fuck was *that*?

I sat numbly in my seat as a student righted her desk, hardly noticing as a shock of copper hair settled beside me. His lean legs stretched out in front of him as he made himself comfortable.

"You sure upset Riot."

My eyes snapped to Kallum, lips pressing into a hard line. "It's none of your business."

Saint sat heavily in his chair, the legs creaking under his weight. His arm found the back of my seat fluidly.

Kallum's eyes slid from my face to Saint's before he looked away with a smirk. "Sure it ain't."

SAINT

FOURTEEN

I stretched in the yellowed grass, brittle and dry from the fall air. My hands pillowed my head as the late afternoon sun washed over my face, warming my cheeks. If I closed my eyes, I could pretend that the scarlet sky was golden, the way it was in Heaven.

I could almost pretend I was *home*.

It wasn't that I missed it, not really. It'd been a long time since I'd considered the birthplace of nephilim my home anyway. But I *did* miss being able to go back and forth to Earth, and my family and my friends, the few of them I had.

If I could even call them my friends anymore.

I loosed a sigh, the weariness heavy in my chest. Bone deep.

Hell wasn't what I expected.

A world aflame with brimstone and the cruelty of demons—that's what I'd been told awaited me here. What I'd feared. What had kept me in line for *so long*.

If I'd known the truth, that what I'd find in the first circle was comfortable, shockingly so, would I have stayed under Michael's thumb?

A light breeze teased my hair, the long stalks of grass skating along my skin as they swayed.

In Heaven, we were taught that demons were senseless—creatures of torment and desire. Pure evil. They told us that the people who ended up in their care were no better.

I knew now that couldn't be true.

Not while Olivia—*Talon*, now—lay beside me, curled to my side for warmth as she napped in the early afternoon sun during our double free

period.

She didn't deserve whatever was supposed to happen to her if she flunked out of this shit show academy. Maybe it was Michael's sick version of a joke that I was cast out of heaven and found myself *here*. Living among demons while staring into the face of the reason I was stripped of my wings.

I should be angry. Even though I wasn't. *I should hate her.* But, as she unconsciously moved closer to my side, lips parted on a soft sigh, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

She'd been my charge first. A loudmouth with a penchant for solving her problems with her fists—something that'd done her more trouble than good more times than I could count. She was also resilient. Fiercely independent. Loyal to a fault.

It was those qualities that'd endeared her to me originally.

But now I knew better. It wasn't just that she was smart or beautiful—Talon shone light on everyone around her. Including me.

This was what I'd dreamed of. My chance to love her the way she deserved. Not from the shadows, but front and centre.

I wouldn't be forced into the background of her afterlife. We'd finally have the kind of relationship that I'd fantasised about since I'd been assigned to watch over her.

I lifted a piece of her dark hair, caressing it between my fingers.

When had she gone from an intangible stranger to someone I'd throw away my entire existence for?

Maybe, if I...

My lips were grazing her cheek before I'd made the conscious decision to lean forward. Surprise skittered through my heart, making it clench uncomfortably at the softness of her skin.

Talon's dark lashes fluttered against her cheeks, her nose scrunching before she opened her eyes. "Saint," she murmured, her molten chocolate gaze crinkled at the edges with a sleepy smile.

I all but swallowed my tongue, forcing my head to bob in a stiff nod. "Hey, angel."

"What are you doing?"

"Don't you remember?" I rumbled, my mouth still reluctant to form words. "You told me that I needed to learn to relax and insisted we nap."

“Oh, yes.” She laughed, snuggling closer to my side on the cool earth.
“You need to stop being such a goody two shoes.”

If only she knew that even now I was committing a grave sin.

Thou shalt not lie.

I turned onto my side, using my palm to hold my head up as I looked down my crooked nose—broken shortly before my Descent—at her.
“What’re you doing?”

“Trying to get warm,” she replied easily, sighing with contentment as she wrapped her limbs around my body. “It looked so cozy on the grass here, I couldn’t resist. But now I’m freezing.”

“Should we go inside?”

“No way. If we go in you’ll start studying again.”

The corner of my mouth twitched. She had a point. I did have a habit of spending more time with my textbooks than with the woman in my arms. I resisted the urge to pull her tighter to me, denying myself the pleasure of her skin was the least I could do to repent for my thoughts.

It wasn’t proper as her guardian for me to want her the way I did.

But you aren’t her guardian anymore, a sly voice whispered in my heart.

“You’re cold,” I reasoned.

She shrugged, stretching her arms high above her head and wiggling her fingers. Whether it was on purpose or by accident, the hem of her casual crew neck sweater lifted, exposing a thin stripe of smooth skin around her navel. I was struck with a sudden, gripping notion to *lick*.

“I figure I only have one afterlife, why not spend it trying to teach you to have a little fun? I never imagined a demon could be such a wet blanket.”

“A wet—*excuse me?*” I demanded, my arm circling around her waist.

She squealed with laughter as I gave in to the desire to tickle her sides.

“Saint! *Basta!*” Talon howled, trying to break free of my hold.

Her body was so small in comparison to mine. I could’ve easily kept her in my grip for as long as I wanted. But I was merciful, and when her giggles hit a crescendo I stopped, pulling her flush to me like I’d denied myself before.

“You *are* a wet blanket,” she insisted with a smile that turned my insides to jelly. “For the physical embodiment of sin, you’re so *tame!*”

What kind of demon eats Raisin Bran?”

My cheeks heated. “What’s wrong with Raisin Bran? It’s delicious and good for you.”

“Exactly!” she said, prodding my chest with her finger like she’d proved her point. “What kind of demon is worried about colon health?”

“I—Well—” I bit down on the inside of my cheek. I couldn’t very well tell her that I *wasn’t* a demon. Not unless I wanted to kiss any chance I had with her goodbye.

Kiss *this* goodbye.

She wouldn’t want to look at me once she knew that I was the reason she was dead.

I’d failed, *massively* as a guardian angel.

“I’m kidding. *Mostly*.” She bit her lip, her eyes dipping to my mouth. “We’ll work you up to fun cereal.”

“If we have to.” I brushed her hair away from where it clung to her face, my thumb dragging along her cheekbone.

“We do. I can’t let you go the rest of your immortal life without appreciating Fruit Loops! That’s a fucking war crime Saint!” She yawned heavily, trying to stifle it behind her hand.

I captured her fingers in mine. “Are you okay? You were sleeping pretty hard.”

“Yeah. Just not sleeping enough. Between trying to figure out how to gain ranks and keep on top of classes...”

“And your new boyfriend,” I muttered.

“What I have with him doesn’t change anything,” she insisted. “Besides, aren’t all you demons polyamorous anyway?”

I grunted noncommittally in response.

Demons might be, but angels weren’t exactly sexual creatures. I was barely equipped to feel attraction for one woman, much less consider the other people she spent her time with.

“I miss blue,” she sighed, oblivious to my internal struggles.

“Blue?” I asked, letting my fingers trail through the grass behind her.

I didn’t like her with Dice. He was reckless. Too keen to put his own needs before hers—especially when it came to making deals. Talon didn’t need another joker in her deck. The odds were already wildly stacked against her.

She needed someone stable. Someone who was going to make sure that she'd be safe. Someone who would make sure Kallum would keep the fuck away from her.

I would be exactly that *if* they won the next game. The bet had been a bit of a gamble, but I'd overheard Wrath in the showers after gym. He'd made it sound like they had it in the bag.

Talon frowned, her dark eyebrows knotting. "I guess you'd never seen it since you're a demon. Where I come from, the sky is blue. Well, sometimes."

The wistful look on her face as she looked up at the purple clouds was enough to stop me from correcting her. I remembered the sky above very well, in all its many shades.

Blue, like the colour of the walls of her bedroom.

Pink, like the shade of her lips, begging for a kiss.

Grey, like her favourite handgun. Never far from her hand.

"You'll see it again, I bet," I murmured, feeling something inside of my chest squeeze.

She closed her eyes. "Maybe." There was a long stretch of comfortable silence before she spoke again. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

"What's your family like?"

I sighed. Now that was a complicated question. Nephilim were first created by God—but then there were means of reproducing. My father—Michael, no surprise that I didn't harbour warm familial feelings for him—banished me here. But I couldn't tell Talon any of that. Because then I'd have to explain *why*.

"My mom has been gone a long time," I started slowly, trying to offer as much truth as I could while staying safely nestled in my web of lies. "Me and my dad? We don't get along."

Talon rolled onto her side, propping her head up and studying my face. "That sounds... *complicated*."

"You don't know the half of it," I grumbled.

We sat in companionable silence for a couple of minutes, Talon's fingers tracing patterns on the back of my hand where I'd rested it on her hip.

"Aren't you going to ask about mine?"

I hadn't been planning to, I knew all about it anyway. But something in her voice said that she wanted to talk and I was weak to her whims.

"What about your family?"

"My parents died when I was about ten," her voice was quiet like she could still remember the sound of the thunder, the feeling of the glass raining down.

I hoped beyond all else that she didn't.

"It was—" she sighed, frustrated.

"You don't have to—"

"No, I want—I need to talk about them. My great-grandmother immigrated to America through New Jersey with my great-grandfather when they were young. He started working at a deli that he eventually purchased, and that was the start of the Ricci family empire. Not all of our businesses were uh, *above board*. It was mafia stuff, my Dad's brother—Gio—took over the *family business* after my parents died." She sat up, circling her arms around her knees. "But with the business came me and Wes—" she blew out a breath, "—that's my older brother—I—I think he just felt guilty. My parents were on a job that Gio was supposed to do, but he blew it off for a date or something." She flopped onto her back and let out a single humourless laugh, restless. "Good old-fashioned Catholic guilt made him take us in, even though Gio was hardly nineteen and had no idea what to do with two snot-nosed kids. Especially not two snot-nosed kids who grew up in the crime world. I learned how to pick a lock before I learned how to spell my middle name."

"It sounds like you loved him,"

"Very much. He wasn't my *dad*, but Gio was my father in a lot of ways. We had a good life with him. Even if there were growing pains." She sniffed and rubbed her eyes with her sleeve.

My fingers twitched with the desire to wipe her tears myself.

"Do you miss them? Your family, I mean."

"Of course I do. Every fucking second. But—I don't want to see them again. Not here. I want Wes to get out of the gang. Finish college." She took a deep breath, smiling sadly. "I want him to live a long and happy life and forget all about me. He's probably so much better off now that he doesn't have to worry about me."

"He's probably gutted," I said without thinking. Wes's naturally downturned mouth had always seemed to smile when she was around.

She laughed once, bitterly. “Relieved more like. With me out of the picture, he can finally leave. I was always holding him back. He’d have taken over just to force me out when the time came.”

“Is that what you really think? That your brother was held back by you? That he didn’t love you?”

She held a hand up in front of her, blocking the sun into smaller sections of light with her fingers. “Isn’t that how all brothers feel about their sisters?”

Maybe that was true for some. But not for Wes.

I pressed my lips together, unable to dispute her without giving myself away.

“Are you hungry?” Talon asked suddenly, sitting up. “All those running drills have been making me into an eating machine. I could probably finish a Nonna-sized plate of pasta in one go. I swear she thought I was eating for five.”

Relief flooded me at the change of conversation. I wasn’t much help when it came to grief. “Yeah, let’s grab a snack in the mess.”

Talon hauled herself up and leaned over me, offering her hand. Backlit in the Underworld sun, she glowed.

I gripped her hand but instead of letting her haul me up, I tugged her down to my chest, rolling so that I was laying on top of her.

She let out a surprised laugh as I drew her hands above her head, pinning them there with one of my own.

“What are you doing?” she whispered breathlessly.

My gaze strayed from her endless brown eyes to her plush lips.

Before her death, I never stood a chance. But now? *Now I could—*

I brought my head down slowly, giving her plenty of time to turn away.

If she wanted me, I would be here. If she didn’t, we could be friends. I wanted to be there for her when the box she shoved her emotions inside split open. Wanted to offer her some comfort when the weight of her new life was too much for her to bear.

But I’d never been good with words. So this would have to do.

Our lips met in a soft brush that I felt like a bolt of lightning through my entire body.

Her faint gasp had me diving in for another more demanding kiss. My tongue licked at the seam of her mouth, seeking passage when a throat cleared beside us.

“Wanna explain what the fuck you are doing on top of my girlfriend, asshole?”

Talon’s face burned. “Dice! *Fuck off*, I’m spending time with my friend today.”

“Yeah, he looks like a friend,” the massive demon growled, his thick eyebrows low in his anger. “Come on, Talon. I have a surprise for you.”

I realised, a little dimly, that Dice was *jealous* of me.

It was in the way he looked between us. Talon was right. Most demons lived polyamorously, and a little kissing in the grass shouldn’t have been enough to put him into a tailspin.

“*You* don’t tell me what to do,” she snapped, moving to sit up. I let her, even though I wanted to keep her pressed beneath me. I’d had far too long of sitting on the sidelines. Now that I was able to be in her life, I wasn’t willing to let anyone come between us.

Dice frowned, running a hand through his short hair as he looked away from Talon’s scowl. “...*Please?*”

Well, fuck.

It wasn’t a surprise to see the word soften the mortal’s expression substantially. She looked between the two of us.

“Saint—”

“It’s fine,” I grunted, looking away to hide my smug grin. “We can pick this up later if you want.”

I wasn’t going to stand between her and her boyfriend, but maybe with a little strategy, she’d pick me instead.

She trailed her fingers down my cheek, her lips curving into a smile that made my chest tight.

“Call me, okay?”

I nodded, standing up and offering her my hand the same as she’d done to me. She let me haul her up, moulding her body to mine and pulling me in by the back of the neck for a long kiss.

Dice scoffed behind us, but his entire irritated demeanour evaporated the second Talon was out of my arms and taking his hand.

“I’ll see you at dinner,” she promised.

“Of course, angel.” I brushed dead grass from my clothes as I watched them walk away, hand in hand.

I’d do anything to have her smile at me like that again. Even if it meant sharing.

TALON

FIFTEEN

Dice coiled his arm around my shoulders, leading me through campus with tension rolling off him in waves.

“Are you okay?” I asked, stumbling a little at his brisk pace.

“Yup,” he snapped, jaw ticking with irritation.

I blinked. He was acting so—so—*jealous*.

But that didn’t make sense. The only thing between us was a bet. *Fiction*. Even if he’d spent the last week cosplaying the perfect boyfriend, it didn’t make any of this real.

“Did seeing me with Saint—” Dice let out a low growl that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, “bother you?”

“Why would I be *bothered*?” He feigned a lazy stretch, the tightness in his jaw and bitterness in his voice giving away his feelings like a neatly wrapped Christmas present. “You aren’t my real girlfriend, you know.”

“Then what I do and who I do it with isn’t any of your business,” I snapped.

It was stupid, but his declaration did hurt my feelings a little. At least I knew he was playing his part—Maybe a little too well.

“Fine,” he spat back, leading us off the paved walkway and onto a winding gravel path through a maze of high hedges.

We strolled in tense silence, Dice eventually taking my hand, his massive palm all but dwarfing my fingers. When I looked up at him it was to find his eyes already on me. He looked away quickly, using his free hand to scratch at the side of his face in an embarrassed sort of way.

When we rounded a corner, the hedge maze split into an alcove. I saw my school books had been set up on a blanket that looked like it had come

from Dice's dorm, along with a picnic of snack cakes and coffees. I looked up at the demon, my lips popped open in surprise.

"What's this?"

"You told me that you needed help with arithmancy."

"You're going to tutor me?" I asked, confused. "You're doing worse than I am!"

"Not exactly." Dice muttered, rubbing the back of his neck as Wrath appeared from the adjoining path, looking resigned.

"I lost a bet." He dropped his bag onto the blanket with a sigh.

"What bet?" I asked immediately, though I knew the second it left my mouth that neither of the demons would bother to reply.

Dice laughed. "It doesn't matter, treasure. Wrath is going to take good care of you and make sure you're up to speed, *for as many sessions as it takes.*" He looked pointedly at the prince, an evil grin curling the corners of his mouth.

"And you're going to watch us study?" I wondered aloud.

"I'm going to take a nap. This shit is boring as fuck," Dice said brightly, kissing my cheek and flopping down on the bedspread. He loosened his tie, settling in on the far side of the blanket.

I sat down a comfortable distance from him, overly aware that Wrath was scrutinizing our entire exchange. With a long-suffering sigh, he joined us, looking uncomfortable in his uniform as he grabbed my textbook off the pile to thumb through the pages.

I'd futilely hoped that a paper copy would work better than digital.

"Okay," Wrath muttered, turning the book to face me. "I'll start you here. In class, it seems like you understand the basics well enough, but you get confused when infinities come into play."

"Yeah, that's about right," I cut a curious look back at Dice, finding him with his hands behind his head, his violet eyes watching us lazily.

"*Study*," he insisted, closing his eyes. "Wake me when you're done and we can go to the fights together."

"What about ancient languages?"

"We're ditching, obviously," Wrath said, setting the book on the blanket. "That class is bullshit anyway. No one uses the infernal tongue anymore." He jabbed at a problem with his finger. "Start here."

I grabbed my tablet from my bag, jotted down the equation, and started to work through it. By the time I handed it to Wrath for review Dice'd

fallen asleep, snoring lightly at my back.

It was kind of... *cute*.

If six-foot-seven demons could be classified as cute, that is.

"You don't have to do this, you know," I muttered, low enough not to wake my not-quite-boyfriend. "Whatever your deal was, consider it fulfilled."

Wrath marked where I made a mistake and pointed to the next problem. "Try again."

"Didn't you hear what I said?"

"I heard you," he said coolly, his green eyes looking me up and down appraisingly. "But you need the help, don't you?"

My cheeks heated. I'd failed this week's quiz *and* the test. If I didn't figure it out soon, I'd be in some real trouble. Academics weren't a one-way ticket to the top 50% of the class, but flunking out was a pretty pitiful way to get cut. As much fun as my eternal suffering sounded, I'd really grown to like my 'life' at the university.

"Then quit arguing—it's irritating—and let me help you," he drawled.

"Fine."

We studied so long that I had to squint at the textbook's pages in the waning light. Wrath was actually a really good tutor. By the fifth equation, I was already doing leaps and bounds better than before, even if I still had a ways to go.

"Do you ever enter the fights?" I asked as we packed away our books, Dice's warmth curled around my back where he'd migrated over the afternoon. His arm laid beside my crossed legs, just close enough that I brushed against him whenever I shifted.

"Heaven no, especially not when we have a match tomorrow."

"That makes sense," I said thoughtfully. It would be hard to score points if I broke my leg in the Pit. "You know, prey kinda reminds me of this game that we used to play when I was alive—capture the flag. Have you ever heard of it?"

"No," Wrath paused and picked up one of the coffees that had long since gone cold. "Humans play it?"

"Yeah—I mean, it's not full contact like prey is. You go into the woods to hide the flags and then the other team tries to find them."

"But what happens if they get your flag?" Wrath asked, fiddling with the cardboard sleeve.

“You try and get it back.” I shrugged.

“By pummelling them into dust?” His eyes lit with interest.

“I mean...” I laughed. “Yes? But not like breaking bones and stuff. Just like... a little tackling or taking it from their hands.”

“You’re all so fragile,” Wrath mused. “Hey—Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“What is the ocean like? Hell doesn’t have continents like the Topside, it goes on infinitely in sand and rock after you leave the Nine Kingdoms.”

“No shit?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Yeah, I mean the fire and brimstone rumour had to start somewhere—”

“Wet,” I interrupted with a wry smile. “It’s very much like a lake, but extremely salty—and the currents are strong.”

“Like in a river?” Curiosity shone in his jade gaze, his hands stilling around the coffee cup.

“Yes, but the current isn’t just on the top of the water, there’s an undertow. And it’s strong. There’s so much water that the waves can destroy entire cities. It’s the reason our skies are blue, actually. A lot of people mistake it that the water reflects the sky, but it’s the other way around—” I cleared my throat, embarrassment teasing heat to the back of my neck.

Wrath’s gaze was so intense, I could practically feel it on my skin. It made me feel... nervous. Like I wanted to please him but had no idea how.

“Sorry, I’m rambling.”

“No, it’s marvellous,” Wrath breathed. “Tell me more. Have you ever seen a shark?” He mimed a mouth opening and closing with his hand. “The big fish with the teeth?”

“Not in the wild, but I saw one at an aquarium.”

“The fish museum?” he asked seriously.

I snorted a laugh. The child-like phrase coming from Wrath’s mouth was a surprise, and unbearably cute.

He frowned, an expression that seemed more natural than a smile on his angular face. “We only get to see the Topside from movies and TV—out of school we mostly consume demon-made media. But I saw Jaws last

year and can't stop thinking about it. Delightfully bloodthirsty creatures, for being fish."

I decided that telling him *Jaws* was a wild exaggeration of shark behaviour was a bad move—especially since he was actually being kind of cool for once.

"Did you know there was a second one?"

"No," he said, his golden eyebrows meeting his hairline. "Is it as good as the first?"

"Absolutely not." I laughed. "But it's watchable."

Wrath hummed thoughtfully, smoothing his jacket with his free hand. "We could watch it after our next session."

"Sounds like a date."

"I'd hardly go that far," he groused, standing and slinging his bag over his shoulder. He kicked Dice's loafered foot with his own, a smirk curling the edges of his mouth. "Hey, Dicey! Your girlfriend is trying to put the moves on me."

"I am not!" I snapped as Dice wrapped his arms around me from behind, dragging me onto his chest. "It's a figure of speech, idiot! *Basta!* Dice! Put me down!"

The demon rumbled a laugh under me, rubbing his stubbled cheek against mine. I relaxed against his chest with a huff.

Warm bourbon and allspice filled my nose, spicy and familiar and *Dice* in a way that I was surprised to find I noticed.

There was just something so normal about being with him. Even as he let me go and I sat up, twisting to get a look at the lazy, lopsided grin on his face—I couldn't shake the feeling that I was in over my head.

He sat up too, caging me in with his thick arms for a quick kiss to the side of my mouth that left my lips tingling in anticipation for more.

Fuck.

The clearly defined lines of my '*sure thing*' were dissolving like chalk drawings in the rain.

And I wasn't doing a damn thing to stop it.

TALON

SIXTEEN

The students at Underworld University were rough and terrifying at times, but they had nothing on Pandemonium City College. Looking across the grass at their prey team, I realised what the *most exclusive university* meant.

The demons that ate my breakfast and tutored me were the top picks, the most well-bred. The ones with money and privilege.

Which meant the monsters sizing me up were an entirely different breed. They weren't glamoured—hadn't been glamoured when they arrived either, with their uniforms more like sashes than jerseys. Scraps of fabric hanging from shoulder to waist in violet and gold.

I swallowed hard, rubbing my sweaty hands on my pants.

Sure, I couldn't *die*. But I could *hurt*.

Their runner smiled, showing rows and rows of thin, needle-like teeth, and I shuddered.

Dice nudged me with his elbow, pulling me out of my thoughts. "You good?"

I looked at him from the corner of my eye with dread coiling in my stomach. "Nope."

How the fuck was I supposed to get past any of the creatures lining the opposite side of the field? I might be quick on my feet but I wasn't a *predator*. I was just a girl.

No, I thought bitterly. *You're the prey.*

He stepped in front of me, bending so that we could be face to face. "Let us worry about them. You just need to run, treasure. Can you do that for me?"

I nodded tightly, setting my jaw as I looked past his massive frame to study the hulking forms of our opponents. Scales and ruffs of fur and claws and teeth.

My eyes flicked back to Dice. Not for the first time I wondered what kind of creature was lurking under the perfect human wrapping he presented to me. He smiled easily, his large hand finding my cheekbone for a soothing stroke of his thumb across my skin. “You can do this. I’ve never seen anyone run like you.”

“I can do this,” I repeated, my gaze hardening as I met his violet eyes. “*I can do this.*”

“That’s my girl,” he praised. “Let’s go win this thing.”

I bobbed my head, my eyes seeking out the rest of my teammates.

It wasn’t mandatory to glamour during the game, though I noticed Dice wasn’t the only one who continued to keep their non-threatening human skin.

Wrath on the other hand?

Glorious black wings had sprung from his back, the feathers shifting in the breeze as it swept through the arena. His honey-blond hair now a murky shade of grey against creamy alabaster skin decorated in a tapestry of tattooed runes. He met my gaze, cocking a dark eyebrow. “What are you staring at?”

“I wasn’t,” I protested weakly, even as my eyes devoured every stupidly handsome plane of his face. His usual masculine beauty was heightened further by gently hollowed cheeks, leaving his high cheekbones impossibly more sculpted.

“You’re so full of yourself, man,” Dice called to the prince before pressing a swift kiss to my cheek and returning to his place at my back. “Like she would want anything to do with an asshole like you!”

Wrath scoffed, smoothing his hair. “Whatever.”

I turned my attention to the other team, my muscles tightening with anticipation.

Dice’s hand stroked down my spine comfortingly. “You just need to run, Talon.”

“You’ve got this,” Poison called from down the line, flashing a cheeky grin full of too-sharp teeth.

How the fuck did I find the monsters across from me terrifying, scary enough to want to hide under my covers—but the demons at my back I

wanted to crawl into the laps of, to suck the sin directly from their full, cruel mouths?

And what the fuck did it say about me that I took one look at the thick ebony horns curling away from Wrath's temples and thought about how I could grip onto them while he—

The buzzer pulled me from my lurid thoughts. I blinked stupidly, looking across the field to see the opposing runner had begun a mad dash towards the flags lining the centre of the pitch.

"Run, precious!" Poison shouted, gesturing wildly for me to move as they passed by, colliding with the Pandemonium chaser.

I shook off my fear, taking one last look at Dice—who flashed me a thumbs up that pushed me into motion, and tore off down the pitch.

This is no different than making a drop.

Take the flag. Bring it to the safe zone.

Get another flag.

Don't get caught by the cops—er, demons.

My feet pounded against the magically plush grass, my heart rate quickening to a gallop as I reached the tree line.

The other team would be in pursuit in seconds, which meant I needed to get as much distance between me and them as possible. Fast. I knew my team would block most of their line and only the strongest or fastest would actually end up chasing me, the rest left to try and keep them busy so they couldn't get to their own runner.

Twigs and brambles caught on my uniform and scraped against my skin, leaving small smarting cuts along my arms and legs.

When I finally burst into the small grove beyond the first dense ring of trees I swung a hard left, hoping that the demons would expect me to take the quickest and most straightforward route to the drop zone.

Warner's enthusiastic coaching was accompanied by my own frantic heartbeat.

The first flag is about learning your opponents.

The second flag is about testing their limits.

And the third flag is about speed.

"Learn your opponents," I whispered, ducking behind a massive rock to wait for them to appear. It was a secondary strategy that staying still would give Spinner time to catch up for our rendezvous.

With any luck, they'd assume I kept moving towards the goal rather than lay in wait. It's certainly what my adrenaline-filled body wanted me to do—move as far and fast away from the Pandemonium team as possible.

I'd barely waited two minutes before the pounding of feet and crunch of fallen leaves met my ears. About a hundred yards back, and gaining quickly. Faster than I would have thought possible without an engine and wheels.

I tried to rein in my panicked breathing, counting down the seconds until who or whatever would pass my hiding spot with my hand over my mouth and nose to dampen the sound.

For one wild moment, I thought it was Spinner's—my relief runner—shaggy brunette head that burst through the trees. Until the rest of its body continued to sail by, picking up speed on its many centipede-like feet. I stuffed my fist in my mouth to stifle my scream.

"Come out to play!" hollered the creature, their voice broken with rhythmic clicks and growls.

As if that was going to happen.

Actually? Fuck the match altogether. I was so not dealing with whatever the fuck that was.

We could use anything in the arena to our advantage, which meant that the demons could use their powers against us if they wanted to. A fact I'd more or less blocked out in favour of the promise of winning earning me rank points.

Rank points I desperately needed if I didn't want to be expelled in a few months.

I shook myself.

Stay on task.

A second set of footsteps passed with a whoop and a howl. I popped my head up enough to get a glimpse of a bipedal demon with a scaled-back and swinging tail disappearing quickly into the wood.

Anxiety pricked its way down my spine.

Where the hell is Spinner? He should have met me by now.

I hesitated.

Should I wait or am I wasting time?

I looked back the way I came—as if by will alone I could see through the dense trees.

A third, slower set of feet was approaching, the gait unfamiliar. I was pretty sure I could outrun them. At least... sure enough.

With the promise of evading expulsion, I launched myself over the rock, making a beeline for the grassy meadow that housed the goal.

A roar exploded from behind me, met with cheers from the audience high above.

I didn't turn my head, but my body, tense with a fresh wave of adrenaline, completely forgot to pick through the forest quietly. I sprinted through the trees with reckless abandon, until my lungs were aching and my legs felt heavy.

The crimson-painted box came into view—relief singing through my veins as I approached.

My feet left the ground with a jerking tug on the back of my jersey, a thick lobster-like claw gripping the fabric and holding me aloft in the air.

The moisture completely left my mouth as I took in the demon that had passed by me only moments ago—forgotten in my fear as I was chased. He wasn't a *centipede* like I'd mistaken him for. I swallowed hard at the sight of the swollen stinger at the end of his curled tail. He was a fucking *scorpion*.

"There you are." He clicked and growled, spittle hitting my face from his thin lips. "I've been looking for you everywhere."

DICE

SEVENTEEN

My knuckles were split from where I'd punched the safeguard straight in his leering face. His razor-like teeth left needle-fine cuts along my hand, but it was worth it after the comment he'd made about Talon.

No one talked about my girl's ass and got away with it, even if she was only pretending to be my girl.

Lucky—the fucking rat—was unconscious, taken out with a single hit from Pandemonium's captain. I made sure to tread on his hand as I whipped passed, delighting at the sound of his pathetic bones crunching under my booted foot.

He'd left Spinner completely undefended, making him fight through the Pandemonium line on his own. Meaning, it'd taken him way longer than it should have to get through the defence line and into the trees. I hoped Spinner could make up the time. Our entire strategy hinged on him and Talon working as a *team*.

A heavy body collided with my right side, knocking me to the ground with a hiss as the air vacated my lungs. I rolled as a clawed foot the length of my forearm made to trample my head, pushing myself back to my feet and launching at the familiar tiger-like creature with a bellow.

I didn't have time for this. Without a second safeguard, someone needed to get to Talon and fast. The entirety of the Pandemonium team was going to be on her ass, trying to get her out of the match by any means necessary. If any of them laid a single finger on her, I was seriously going to lose my shit.

Fucking Lucky.

It wasn't my plan to play the part of a doting boyfriend to an injured player. I didn't have the patience for that shit.

My foot connected hard with the familiar demon's chest, making him stumble back a step.

"Scared to show your face, Dice?" snarked Carver, trying to piss me off. He ran his paw-like hand down his face, his claws just barely grazing against his furred cheek.

I hadn't forgotten the last time we'd met on the pitch. Or off it.

It wasn't the first time one of my deals had gone south—but it was certainly the most memorable, given I couldn't look in the mirror anymore without seeing the scars from where I'd lost my eye.

"Still prettier than you, kitty," I growled, my arms circling his great maned neck and tightening until I was cutting off Carver's airway. He scratched and bucked, but Carver's resolve had nothing on mine.

He was fighting for stupid league points.

I was fighting to prove that the scratch he'd landed on my face was a lucky shot.

Poison's laugh was loud as they circled Carver with thick, steely grey tentacles, squeezing so hard that the demon's eyes bugged.

"Someone needs to get to the runner!" I shouted as the alarm blared overhead. Someone, I wasn't sure who, had scored a point.

"I'll get her!" Poison's tentacles writhed until Carver went slack in their hold. They threw the oversized house cat to the side like a rag doll, the appendages retracting back into their flesh with a wet *pop*.

"Like Heaven, you will!" snarled Wrath, green eyes blazing. "Let her rot. You have jobs to do, now fucking do them!"

I growled. I hated when Wrath barked orders at me, but...

My eyes were dragged to the far side of the field where the Pandemonium player had disappeared during the scuffle carrying their second flag. I took off towards the boundary, looking over my shoulder at Poison as my glamour fell away. "Go get her! I don't give a fuck what he says."

I still didn't like the shapeshifter, but if they kept Talon safe... I guessed a demon could find it in their heart to be grateful.

My focus zeroed in on the forest as I crashed through the brush.

Something wasn't right. My instincts were telling me that Lucky had let himself get laid out. Which meant he was trying to throw the game. But

why? It couldn't be as simple as that, could it?

I growled, rubbing the familiar scarred slash of my left eye with irritation.

Without more information, every move was a gamble.

A glimmer of purple and gold through the foliage ahead warned I was closing in on the Pandemonium runner. I'd take care of them as quickly as possible, trusting Poison to get to Talon before the other team.

I just hoped I wasn't making a bet that would cost me more than a few stupid rank points. Someone had too many pieces on the board.

POISON

EIGHTEEN

I watched Dice's hulking back disappear into the treeline, chewing on my bottom lip.

Without Lucky in the game, Talon was in for a whole lot of trouble. We'd done a good job at keeping the chasers busy, but our defensive line was severely compromised without the weasel.

I shot a look at Wrath, preoccupied with fending off the last of their chasers—a bird-like creature with a gaping maw filled with hundreds of little black beetles—a determined set to his jaw.

Orders be damned, the prince should be able to handle a fight one-on-one. I booked it for the outfield, hitting the trees in record time.

Dice wouldn't ask for my help unless he was really worried. I'd seen the hit that took out Lucky—it looked like it was planned. The only question was whether the fucker was looking to throw the match or if he had other plans for Talon.

I reached the rendezvous point where the useless asshole in question was supposed to meet our relief runner. My eyes swivelled and I sniffed the air, but there was no sign of Talon or her telltale raspberry and sugar scent anywhere. Or of Spinner and his gasoline.

Good. She was smart not to wait for help that wasn't going to come.

And hopefully, he was chasing her down.

A warm feeling flooded my chest as I shifted. My body exploded in size, shimmering scales erupting along my skin as I prepared for a fight the closer I got to the drop zone.

I didn't have time to examine what it was, but I let it carry me as my claws dug into the soft earth below.

A terrified scream broke the relative silence—that warmth transforming into an inferno that scorched the tender garden I'd been cultivating in my heart.

I'd burn them all to ashes.

TALON

NINETEEN

I was so fucked.

None of the practice drills prepared me to hang upside-down, ten feet in the air, with my calf pinched by a scorpion claw. The pressure biting into my leg warned me just how easy it would be for him to snap the bone in half, taking me out of the game completely. The fibres dug in unpleasantly through my uniform, the fabric damp with blood.

I couldn't afford for that to happen. Not when I still hadn't broken fifteen hundred.

"Put me down!" I shouted, my voice hoarse from screaming.

"Don't think I will. Give me that flag."

He reached for it and I curled up tight around it like an armadillo—minus the armour. My abs, or lack thereof, screamed in protest as he shook me hard enough that my vision blurred.

"Stop!"

"Give it!" he demanded.

"You'll make me puke!" I warned, my stomach turning. "Dickhead!"

"Give me the flag or I'll rip your fucking leg off!"

"You aren't allowed to do lasting damage! Read the fucking manual!" I shouted back, using the flag's pole to try and pry his claw from my leg.

Above us, a roar shook the trees. The stadium erupted into a deafening wave of cheers.

"What the fuck?" clicked my captor, his attention shifting to the sky.

I used the distraction to my advantage, finally managing to wedge the steel bar between his claw and my leg. I pushed with all the force I could muster from my compromised position, the claw opening just enough for

me to yank my leg out. I hurtled towards the ground, rolling to try and land on anything but my face.

My wrist snapped on impact with the packed dirt, making my scabble to my feet more painful than I'd planned. But hey, a broken wrist was definitely better than a broken leg. I could still run with a broken wrist.

I gripped the flag in my good hand as another roar pierced the air.

Fire erupted between the scorpion and me, scorching the earth and threatening my eyebrows. I blinked hard, both to coax some moisture into my dried-out eyes and to try and make sense of what I was seeing.

Ruby scales glowed in the flames as a dragon—an *honest to Jesus, God, Mary, and Joseph dragon*—landed heavily in the clearing.

My jaw hung open as the creature splayed its wings, the spine-tipped ends glinting in the light like gold.

What.

The.

Fuck.

The scorpion launched itself at the literal mythical creature that'd joined the fray, snapping at the beast with its claws and trying to evade its snouted face as it spouted fire from its mouth.

Monsters. I'm surrounded by fucking *monsters*.

I did what any normal girl would do—I ran for my fucking life. I'd have time to question if I was hallucinating or delirious from adrenaline and pain later.

I didn't stop until I reached the box, dropping the flag into its bottom to a howl of applause and cheers from the dome above.

The alarm blared and I turned, skirting around the grappling beasts to head for the centre of the pitch. We had two more flags to go if we wanted to win.

I favoured my throbbing wrist, cradling it in my hand. From what I could tell the impact had all but splintered it. I'd broken it once before while climbing over a chain link fence and could still remember the pain while I ran from the Moretti sisters. Turns out that they weren't super keen on me pocketing the keys to their dad's Lambo. I sent up a silent prayer, glad that the fragmented bones hadn't pierced the skin.

The road ahead was mostly clear, save for a few deep gashes in the earth from fights I'd missed while the dickhead back there tried to use me as a human piñata.

In the middle of the deserted pitch, the remaining flags waved merrily in the breeze.

It set me on edge.

There's no way it would be that easy.

I hesitated, listening for anyone else, but my human senses were a major handicap with the sound of the crowd and skirmishes happening just inside the woods.

Fire erupted out of the trees from the way I'd come, arcing into the sky amid gasps and shouts.

I broke into a run, every step jarring my wrist and making it ache until I reached my goal. I yanked a flag out of the middle of the field and raced back the way I'd come.

If I could just get this point we'd be in the lead.

I'd hardly stepped a foot into the shade of the trees when something heavy stuck me in the back of the head, making my vision blur. Another strike had me on the ground, warm wet spilling down through my hair to pool in the collar of my jersey. I blinked past the blurriness in my vision, trying to crawl away from my attacker.

"I can't tell you how often I've dreamed of this," Kallum shouted over the collective gasps of the crowd.

"Fucking... bastard..." I choked through numb lips.

Kallum laughed, his manic expression flecked with my blood. "Night, night, Olivia."

When the darkness closed in I couldn't help but feel like this had happened once before, but someone had been there to make it easier. A flicker, not quite a memory, more like the impression of someone crying with many icy blue eyes.

And then I was gone.

IT FELT A BIT LIKE FLOATING. Like the saltwater and sunshine that I'd come to associate with beach vacations and summer at the Shore.

That all evaporated when I opened my eyes to the sterile nurse's office. Silvery moonlight drifted through the windows and met the warm glow of

a bedside lamp. The little cot I lay in was comfortable and warm thanks to the quilt pulled to my chin.

I sat up, finding Mouse watching videos on her phone with headphones, her lip curled in irritation.

“Hey,” I rasped, my mouth cottony.

How long was I out?

Did we lose the game?

Where am I?

She started. “Oh good, you’re up. The nurse didn’t know how long you’d be out. How do you feel?”

“Like I’ve had the best sleep of my life.” My brows pulled together as I twisted my previously broken wrist back and forth. The pain was gone and the movement was completely uninhibited—a welcome surprise. “How long was I out? Why am I not hanging out in the Afterlife’s afterlife right now?”

“Only a few hours.” Mouse’s fingers flew over her tempered screen and my own phone lit on the bedside table. “Don’t look at that, I made a group chat with Poison, Saint and Dice. They were annoying the fuck out of me with their fussing and complaining. I told them I’d let them know when you woke up if they left.”

“Right,” I muttered, flexing my fingers absently. “The healing?”

“Well, after Lucky busted your head open like a water balloon they took you out of the wards so they could heal you. Injuries are expected during a game—but attacking a teammate like that? He’s in *huge* trouble.”

“Right,” I repeated, my fingers finding the back of my head only to be met with clean, smooth hair. “Did we win the—”

“Fuck no. Spinner was taken out shortly before you were.”

I groaned and flopped down against the pillows. “There go my rank points.”

Mouse smiled sympathetically as my phone buzzed again. “Assholes incoming, unless you’d rather I turn them away?”

“No, it’s fine.” I lifted the blankets, finding myself in a pair of my pyjamas. “Did you dress me?”

“Magic,” Mouse replied like it was obvious, waving her dark hand.

“Right.”

“Please say something else, you’re freaking me out.”

I laughed and grabbed my phone, finding my messages icon had the little 99+ alerts button flashing. “Sorry.”

Mouse rolled her eyes. “Seriously, you’d think you died again. You weren’t in any real danger of becoming an Erros. Lucky is just a dickhead.”

“Sure felt like I was close to the veil,” I mused. A memory of opalescent, feathered wings pushed itself to the front of my jumbled mind. “Hey, when you died did you forget stuff? I didn’t think about it much but something hap—”

The door burst open and three incredibly pissed off demons fought to get through the limited space in the doorway first in a tangle of limbs.

Poison transformed into a butterfly with a small pop, its orange and black wings fluttering as they easily outstripped Dice and Saint. They floated over my bed, transforming back into themselves and dropping onto the edge of the mattress with concern pulling their dark brows together. “Are you alright? I’m going to burn that piece of shit wannabe mobster to a crisp.”

“I’m fine,” I assured them, the corner of my mouth threatening a smile.

Poison wasn’t the person I’d expect to promise violent retaliation.

They took my hands, inspecting my arms for injuries.

“But you—”

“*Better* than fine,” I insisted.

“Let her up Poison,” called Saint as Dice managed to shoulder past.

“But—” they argued.

“Poison.” I swung my legs over the bedside and hopped onto the tile floor, cold on my bare toes as they wrapped me in a hug. “I’m okay. You don’t have to worry.”

It was true. Even the click in my knee from when I popped it out of place evading the cops on the Upper East Side was gone. I felt like a new woman.

Dice pried us apart, his hands gripping the sides of my face as he turned it this way and that. “That guy is fucking dog food for touching you, treasure. I swear it. I thought he’d fucking—”

“I saw everything on the big screen. It was a dirty trick, angel. If he manages to avoid expulsion it’ll be too good for him.” Saint’s white-blond

hair was sticking up at all ends like he'd been running his hand through it anxiously, his icy blue eyes lined with worry.

I put my hands over Dice's, raising an eyebrow. "Are you done? You're going to give me whiplash."

"No, I'm not!" he snarled, his violet eyes troubled. "I thought that fucker had killed you!"

"We all did," Poison muttered, their arms wrapping around me from behind. "Thank Eve you're alright."

The door slammed so hard it made all of us jump. Riot stormed into the room furiously, Wrath hot on her heels.

"I told you to tell me when she woke up," he snapped from behind Riot, his jade gaze tight and angry.

Riot stalked towards us, smoke unfurling around her in waves. "Move."

The command in her voice was final, my partners stepping away from me reluctantly as she wrapped me in a punishing embrace with her face buried in the side of my neck. "Sorry. I can't—I just—need to be here—" she gasped between deep breaths, her hands passing down my back.

"Oh yeah, blame the *mutt*," Dice muttered harshly. "Like you don't have a crush on her, Riri."

Saint, Poison, and Wrath stiffened at the news.

A delighted grin spread over Mouse's face. "You don't say?" she said shrewdly, earning her glares from all around the room.

"Out," Wrath hissed at her, moving aside to let her pass through the door with a flourish of his hand. "Now."

"You aren't the boss of me," Mouse protested.

I moved to pull away from Riot and she growled, low and deep.

"Yes, I am," Wrath snapped, all but shoving her out the door and closing it in her face.

"Hey! You can't push my friends around like that, asshole!"

"Actually, I'm pretty sure I can." Wrath shifted like he wanted to move closer, one eye on Riot's back. The smoke had dissipated now, her body relaxing. She released me like she'd been burned, taking a staggered step backwards.

"Sorry."

"Looking for a kiss too, Ri? Or was copping a feel enough?" Dice teased.

Riot opened her mouth to retort before Saint cut her off by clearing his throat. “Are you hungry, Talon? We could go get some late dinner?”

Riot’s lip curled and she turned on her heel, storming away. “I didn’t cop a feel!” she shouted, yanking the door open to reveal Mouse once more.

My friend looked like it was Christmas morning and she’d just been gifted a brand-new BMW. All of my love-life drama was probably worth a fortune in the information trade. She waved jovially at me. “See you later!”

“Sure looked like it from where I was standing,” Dice singsonged.

Riot turned and I caught her eye, wild with fury and something softer, more personal—embarrassment. “Next time keep your fucking wits about you! It’s so pathetic that you let Lucky take you out like that!” she hollered and slammed the door.

I frowned, barely registering as Saint collected my jacket from the back of a chair and helped me into it.

“Do you have to be such an asshole?” I snapped at Dice, shooting him a glare as I tugged on my socks and boots.

“It’s part of my charm.” He grinned to scoffs and eye rolls from everyone else.

I groaned. “I’m going to talk to her—thank you for the offer, Saint. Let’s have breakfast tomorrow, okay?”

“Of course,” he agreed easily, bending for a quick kiss that left my knees a little wobbly as I headed for the door.

“Let me walk you!” Poison called, ducking around Dice and grabbing my hand.

Wrath’s fingers grazed my wrist so lightly that I could’ve imagined it, his voice low and urgent. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,”

“Good. See that she makes it to her dorm safely, Poison.” Wrath opened the door, scowling at Dice as he made a move to follow Poison and me through it. “You, stay. We are going to have a conversation about goading dogs into biting. You too, feathers.”

“What in Heaven did I do?” Saint protested.

Wrath’s reply was cut off as the door snicked shut behind us, leaving us alone in the hallway.

I noticed for the first time the dark circles under Poison's eyes and the smell of smoke clinging to them in an overpowering fog. "You scared the fuck out of me, precious."

Like striking a match, recognition sang through me.

"You can turn into a fucking *dragon*?"

"I mean, yeah." They laughed, lips curling at the edges almost shyly. "Did I scare you?"

"Absolutely." I squeezed their hand at their nervous expression. "It was so *COOL*!"

"Not as cool as that goal you scored. You hit the ground so hard I was scared you broke something."

"I did!" I said with excitement, brandishing my healed wrist. "But it's all good now."

"I'm impressed." Poison slung their arm around my shoulders, drawing me in close as they walked down the hall. "You'll be the talk of the school tomorrow for sure."

"Where are we going?" I asked as they led me past the lobby and into the darkened grounds.

"You want to find Riot wherever she went off to sulk, right?"

I nodded, marvelling again at how good I felt. Hell magic was something else.

"Her favourite place to mope is our dorm, but we should take our time getting there. I don't want her to lose her temper when she first sees you."

"You seem to know her pretty well."

"We go way back," Poison said ominously, releasing me and lighting a cigarette as we walked. "I can't call us friends, but there is little I wouldn't do for her happiness. Even if that means giving up even more of your time."

I sighed. "I don't know how I'm supposed to juggle it all."

Poison laughed and took a long drag, blowing a stream of smoke from their nose and mouth. "Let us fight for your time. You deserve to be a little spoiled, especially after a scare like that." They pressed a swift, tobacco and mint-flavoured kiss to my lips. "I'll try and track Mouse down to give you two some privacy to work things out, okay?"

I squinted up at the shapeshifter. "Are you trying to earn the partner of the month award?"

“P-partner of the month?” they cackled before they composed themselves, leering down at me. “Am I likely to win?”

I rolled my eyes and kissed them on the cheek. “If there was an award, I think you’d long be in the lead.”

Poison beamed. “I like you.”

“I like you, too,” I replied, taking their hand. “Let’s go find Riot before she trashes our room.”

RIOT

TWENTY

I threw myself down into my bed, my face burning as I buried it into my pillow.

What the fuck did Dice know?

I didn't have a stupid crush on the topsider. I—No, *Shadow* had a pull to her after she patched us up. It was a demon and host problem, not... not whatever Dice was insinuating about feelings or whatever bullshit he'd convinced himself I was feeling.

Though, I guessed that bringing her breakfast and offering to fight her battles wasn't exactly helping my case.

The door opened behind me, and I growled.

"Dice, if you don't fuck off I will make you wish you had."

"Tough crowd," Talon said with a light laugh.

The lamp at my bedside clicked on and I sat bolt upright.

"Talon," I warned as she stood in front of me, the lamplight reflecting in her brown eyes and turning them molten.

My vision swam with Shadow's insistence for control. But I wouldn't let him have her.

She could've died today. Become an Erros. Left to wander through hell eternally with no hope of ever seeing the surface again—if she even wanted to. Really, I was more upset about what it would mean for me.

That I'd never get the chance to see her smile again. Or watch the way her expression softened as Poison lifted her breakfast each morning.

Shadow howled along the inside of my flesh, its claws dragging along my muscles as it recognised the person that saved us from the veil. Since

that day in the bathroom he'd been inconsolable, all but demanding that I get closer to the mouthy brunette.

Talon stepped closer and I froze, my lips parted to tell her to stop, to turn around and run away from me as fast as she could. I was barely in control of Shadow as it was, and the closer she got—

“Don’t worry,” her voice was softer than I’d ever heard it, the curve of her lips an invitation that I had to fist the bedspread to stop from accepting. “We can go at your pace.”

Between the lightly tousled waves of her dark hair and the swollen puffiness of her lips, I couldn’t move. I should’ve cared that minutes ago she was kissing Dice like he was her reason to breathe.

Or Poison.

Or Saint.

I should've. But I didn't. I just *wanted*.

Touch her, the demon inside demanded.

You'll hurt her, I shot back.

Shadow snarled, my heart squeezing as I fought to keep still, to keep her safe from the monster I'd tied myself to.

I'd never regretted the decision before—binding myself to a demon to stay with my friends forever as one of them. But as I stared at this woman with need festering in my blood like a sickness... I wondered what it would be like to touch her the way the others could.

As it was, I'd barely managed to hold myself back in the infirmary.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted before I consciously made the decision to speak, “for yelling.”

It felt like I was *always* yelling at her. And to what end? To push her further away. The exact opposite of what I *really* wanted?

Talon tucked her hair behind her ear, her delicate fingers teasing through the tangled strands at the bottom. “Y’know, this probably comes as a shock but I come from a big, loud, Italian family.” She smiled wryly. “A little yelling doesn’t bother me. I struggle too. Sometimes I feel like I’m just going to explode if I don’t *do* something.”

My nails were digging half-moons into my palms hard enough that I was sure I’d bleed. The words had been at the tip of my tongue since the morning I woke up in my own bed with Talon sleeping through her blaring alarm. It was then I realised what happened. I’d lost control again.

“Thank you—for the bathroom, I mean,” I ground out before I lost my nerve.

She leaned forward, her eyes studying my face. I *no idea what she saw there that she tucked two of her fingers under my chin, tilting my face up to hers.

“Is this okay?” she asked in a too careful whisper—like I was some kind of animal fit to startle.

Maybe I was.

Shadow rattled the confines of their binding. His ghostly claws shredding my very soul to tatters. The walls I’d carefully built around myself were turning to dust, the mortar crumbling away and leaving the bricks to fall.

I was frozen as her lips brushed against mine, so gentle I could have imagined it if not for the way it made my heart feel like it was going to explode from the pressure.

“I—”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to say anything.” she pulled away, her fingers stopping to smooth a lock of my hair that had escaped my ponytail. “Goodnight.”

“I—” I stammered as Talon turned and kicked off her shoes. She climbed into bed, closing the hangings around her.

I barely heard the sound of her coat and then her pyjamas hitting the floor over the panicked beating of my own heart.

No. *No!* There's no way that was it. I couldn't—I *needed*—

I was on my feet in an instant, stumbling in my rush to reach her. My fingers curled over the edge of the bed hangings, pulling them wide.

"I don't want to go slow," I rushed out.

"Thank fuck for that. I was totally going to have to rub one out under here." She lifted the covers, revealing the delicious black lace of her bra and panties, and I moved to climb in. “No way!” she protested. “Strip first. I don't want your dirty uniform in my bed.”

"Whatever you want, princess." I shed my tie, letting it join her clothes on the floor. Next came my shirt, Talon's predatory gaze watching my every move as I slowly undid the buttons and shrugged it off.

I could do this. Shadow wouldn't be a barrier for us. I could keep my cool.

I'd fucked other people. How would this be any different? Sure it'd been a while and maybe I was a little out of practice—

"You're so gorgeous," Talon praised, her dark hair spilling over the pillow like oil.

I grinned, unzipping my pants and letting them fall to the floor. "You're literally a goddess."

It wasn't lost on me that this may be the most we'd spoken in a single setting. It stung that it was my own fault.

"Is it sexist that I like when you wear the skirt more?"

"Why would it be?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't know." Talon waggled her eyebrows suggestively. "I just think it's really hot the way it looks on you. The pants really hide how stacked your legs are."

"Stacked?" I snorted. "Well, I'll take it into consideration—I certainly enjoyed playing with you under yours."

She bit her lip. "I'm getting cold. Get in already."

I instinctually sought her warmth as I slid beneath the sheets. Her skin was soft, moon-pale like the reflection of the lake where I grew up—before I was *this*.

Talon grinned as I brought my mouth back to hers, interrupting our kiss as my lips pressed against her teeth.

"Sorry," she breathed, "I wasn't expecting—have you ever, um, been with a girl before? That's a stupid question, right? You definitely seemed like you knew what you were doing when—"

I nipped at her cheek and she yelped. It would be easier to show her than to try and explain myself. Besides, that story was too sad to think about now. Not to mention ancient history, ashes and dust.

I kissed up the side of her neck, pausing to nibble at the soft spot between her jaw and ear.

Words had always been difficult for me. It wasn't that I was stupid, I just felt like I couldn't easily get my point across. But this? This could be so *easy*.

"Why don't I just show you?" I murmured against her flesh, my tongue snaking out to lave at where my teeth had just been.

Talon went liquid in my arms, her lips parted on a soft moan. "Yes! Yes, *please*."

I brushed my fingers over her trim waist and up her ribs, trailing the tips against the sensitive flesh of her lower breast.

“Are you okay with this?”

“Yes. Don’t stop.”

Talon’s lips sought mine out, her tongue exploring my mouth as I rubbed my thumbs over her nipples through layers of lace and cotton. She tasted of lingering tobacco—Poison’s cigarettes—and sweet summer berries. A dangerous and heady combination, a warning that despite the arousal pooling at my core, the woman in my arms didn’t belong to me alone.

Shadow preened, and I sighed into her mouth, teasing at the lacy edge of her bra before I hooked a finger under the strap, dragging it down her shoulder with agonising slowness.

Talon gasped as my hand dipped into the cup of her bra, finding her pert nipple and tweaking it between my fingers.

“Can I touch you?” she breathed, her eyes hooded.

“Yes—” I said too quickly to my own ears, too eager. Shadow practically roared at the thought, pressing against the confines of his cage and making goosebumps erupt over my skin. “But I need—” I ground out, fighting to keep him at bay. “I need to be in control. Is that okay?”

“Of course.” Her hands found my hair, gathering the strands into her fist and using them to pull my mouth back to hers. We kissed lazily, like we had all the time in the world. As if we didn’t have to worry about being interrupted at any moment by one of our roommates or one of the other ridiculous assholes that always seemed to be circling her like a flock of parking lot seagulls looking for a french fry.

I couldn’t get enough.

Shadow purred, my chest rattling with the force of their pleasure. *Mate.*

It wasn’t the first time I’d heard them say it. But it was the first while her taste was on my tongue.

Creatures like Shadow weren’t like us. They didn’t date, or pick multiple partners and form family units. They had a biological need to form a connection with one being only, relying on their sense of smell and intuition to make the right choice.

He’d screamed at me about her since Dice carried me down the hall and we got the first lungful of her raspberry body wash.

My hand slipped behind her, finding the closure of her bra and unclasping it. She removed the scrap of lace, revealing her breasts to my eager gaze. I bent, claiming one of her little pink nipples in my mouth for a soft nip and a circle of my tongue that had her whimpering my praises.

“That's it, princess,” I murmured, the fist-sized knot in my chest from watching her bleed out onto the grass loosening with every soft sound escaping her lips. “I want to hear when something I do feels good for you.”

“Riot, stop teasing,” she insisted, grabbing my wrist and guiding my hand to her core, warm and wet through her panties.

“Done with foreplay already?” I purred. “Fine by me.” I slipped out of her hold, using a hand on her knee to part her legs enough to allow my shoulders clearance.

The thin strip of fabric that Talon called a pair of panties was swiftly moved to the side, my fingers brushing the now exposed lips of her pussy and collecting her slick arousal.

Weirdly enough, the idea of sharing her with Poison didn't fill me with rage. I even liked the way their taste blended with hers. Perhaps there was hope that we could share her together someday. I wondered how her moans would change with the shapeshifter's cock in her mouth.

Shadow didn't agree. He was tense, demanding, pushing his wants to the forefront of my mind. My jaw ached with his desire to *bite*.

I kissed and nibbled down the inside of her leg, my thumb teasing the hood of her clit in slow, practised moves.

Talon's fingers flexed in my hair, pulling at the roots with just enough pressure to make my pussy squeeze hard around nothing.

I reached the crease of her thigh, sinking my teeth into the sensitive flesh, marking her so that when she returned to her other lovers they'd have no doubt of my claim. I sucked the spot, a vibrant bruise blooming to life under my attention.

That little piece of me would follow her everywhere she went like a brand. I should've left one in a more visible spot.

Shadow seethed that I didn't break the skin.

But I wouldn't hurt her. Not more than she wanted me to.

I licked her in one long, tortuously slow move from her opening to her clit, pausing to circle my tongue over the sensitive bundle of nerves.

There would be no more teasing. I wanted to feel Talon's pussy flutter around my fingers as I made her come. Hear her scream for me as she shattered completely.

She rewarded me with a loud moan, her hips bucking off the bed to meet my touches.

I lapped at her folds, collecting the taste of her desire on my tongue like it was an elixir of immortality. What I lacked in careful finesse was made up with grit and enthusiasm. Giving head was never simply about getting my partner off—I loved doing it. My tongue snaked inside her, lapping against her inner walls and offering the smallest amount of relief for her need for friction.

She shuddered in my hold, those tricky fingers finding the back of my head.

“More!” she demanded, raising her hips to grind against my face.

I could have fucking wept. I shifted just enough to capture her clit in my mouth, sucking lightly at her clit as my fingers slid home in Talon's hot, wet cunt. I rubbed against the rough patch of skin hidden deep inside her, using my other hand to keep my balance as I feasted on the pearl of nerves, drawing her closer and closer to the edge.

“Fuck! Riot—I'm gonna—!” she tensed, her muscles spasming around my hand as she careened over the edge of ecstasy.

Her moan was a symphony to my ears. I renewed my efforts to prolong the noise, aiming for a second orgasm on the tail end of the first.

Anything to make her whisper my name like that again.

“Oh fuck, Riot! A break! A break!” she whined, pushing my face away as her thighs trembled.

I grinned up at her, glossy with her release. “You sure, princess?” I slowly withdrew my fingers and pushed them back in, earning another delightful lust-ridden noise.

“Mm, I wanna touch you. C'mere.”

“I—” Shadow pushed to the front so quickly it left me feeling winded. I clamped down hard on my mental barrier, breathing through the shift in their interest. My body felt like the raw edge of a live wire—unpredictable and dangerous.

My face twitched with the effort of keeping control, Shadow too close to the surface for me to trust losing myself in an orgasm.

“Wait—what was that?” Talon sat up quickly, her dark hair falling over her shoulder as she moved backwards over the mattress.

“Nothing—” I rushed out, scrambling to sit up. “Talon, listen—”

She reached out slowly and I fought the urge to retreat, letting her place her hands on either side of my face. “I told you we’d go at your pace and I meant it. Are you not into receiving head?”

“It’s not... that.” I swallowed hard, racing through what to say.

“Your pace,” she assured.

“I’m not good at—being touched that way.”

It wasn’t the total truth, the need for her to touch me burned in my veins like fire, but my control was slipping, and Shadow’s eagerness to connect with Talon scared the hell out of me. What if I hurt her? What if Shadow did something I couldn’t take back?

Her thumbs brushed my cheekbones, eyes soft and understanding. “If that ever changes, let me know, okay?”

“I will,” I promised, my heart pounding. “Can I kiss you?”

She adjusted so I could press against her chest, bringing her lips to mine. “Yes. Mm, you taste like me.” Her hands slid from my face to rest on my hips, running small circles over the exposed skin. “Is this okay?”

I pulled her tighter against me, burying my face into the side of her neck as Shadow settled.

“Why aren’t you afraid of me?” I whispered.

“Because I’m pretty sure I could kick your ass,” she teased, swatting my hip playfully.

I scoffed. “As if.”

“Well, I know it can be done.”

“Gauntlet is a special case, Talon,” I deadpanned. The guy was nearly seven feet tall and weighed two hundred pounds more than me. It was a wonder I lasted as long as I did against him.

“So am I.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “You are.”

I breathed her in, filling my lungs with her sweet scent until my head swam.

The truth was at the tip of my tongue. But I couldn’t tell her about Shadow. Not without betraying Dice and Wrath.

It didn’t matter how special she was to me. Or to Shadow. I couldn’t cross that line.

Wouldn't cross it.
Even if I wanted to.

TALON

TWENTY ONE

I spent most of Sunday hanging out with Saint and Poison, holed up in our dormitory to avoid what the rumour mill had to say about what went on at the match. Since the entire school watched Kallum crack my head like a cheap communion wafer, there was little avoiding the curious stares as I settled into my usual seat at our table in the meal hall.

The videos didn't help with the attention, though they did help me piece together what happened after I blacked out.

Pure, unfiltered chaos.

My teammates had dogpiled my piece of shit ex-boyfriend when he emerged from the wood, splattered in my blood like he'd been to war. Spinner and Gauntlet got hold of him first like they took personal offence to him betraying the team.

Dice and Poison rushed me to the medics for emergency medical attention, the two of their faces ashen with worry.

Saint had a hold of Riot by the waist in the stands as she clawed at his arms, trying to get down to join the fray on the field.

What surprised me though, was Wrath, the way that the scuffle parted under his quivering rage. He looked as much the part of the dark, vengeful angel as I'd thought the first time I saw him without his glamour. None of the videos I'd seen were shot close enough to catch what the demon said to Kallum, but I could make some guesses based on the way the colour drained from the asshole's face.

My eyes caught on Wrath without my permission where he sat at the sunken table, cheeks heating when I found his gaze already on me. His lips tilted into a faint, barely perceptible smile, his head tilting so that the

smattering of earrings decorating the shell of his ear caught the light. His uniform, as always, was immaculate, freshly pressed and not a stitch out of place.

By contrast, Riot looked almost sloppy this morning. Her usually smooth hair was pulled into a messy knot on the top of her head, the sleeves of her white button-down pushed up to her elbows—the blazer discarded over the back of her chair.

I don't know how I expected things to change between Riot and me after what happened between us Saturday night, but it certainly wasn't that she'd be even tenser than before.

Sure, she'd dropped off my habitual toast and coffee. Trading out the iced latte for a cappuccino like she'd decided it was officially too cold for iced *anything*. Or maybe she'd just learned to make them. Either way, she didn't sit at our table, taking up her usual seat at Wrath's right hand. Pushing her breakfast around her plate as she looked resolutely at the rapidly cooling eggs.

As much as I wanted to slide into her lap and soothe the tight, stressed lines of her shoulders, I had bigger problems than Riot's bad mood this morning. Besides, it's not like sex *had* to mean anything. I'd had plenty of it that didn't. But I kind of thought that it had, like she was finally showing a crumb of vulnerability under that chip she wore on her shoulder.

Poison and Dice crowded my sides tightly, Saint seated at Poison's shoulder and looking a little put-out. Mouse rounded us off on the opposite side of the table, muttering under her breath as she poured over the tips from last night.

No rest for wicked little information brokers. She'd been the one to tell us that Kallum was nearly expelled for his little stunt at the game—turns out a third-year had walked by the Headmistress' office as she reamed him out. *For two hours.*

Kallum had been removed from the prey team, cutting him off from two very important things—the social status of a varsity player and the ability to easily accrue rank points. Which meant that he'd be out for my blood tenfold.

Merda.

I slid my half-finished toast towards Poison, something that'd become a bit of a habit between us. Even Riot noticed, upping my two slices to four like she was worried that I wasn't getting enough calories.

There was something about that little change that made my heart squeeze. She wasn't just looking after me, but the people I cared about, too.

In my previous relationships, I was lucky to get flowers on an anniversary, which made the constant fussing of these demons—even more obvious since my stint in the hospital—a little overwhelming.

I hadn't been coddled so much since I went on my first job. Sure, Nonna fussed over me like I was still a rowdy toddler, bringing me things to eat and making sure that I was dressed warmly, but the kind of careful calculation that went into the affections of these creatures warmed my heart.

They brought me meals and snacks, kept my water bottle full, and ensured I always had a blanket on the sofa. Even Wrath, who I'd pretty much written off as being an entitled dickhead who only spent time with me when forced into it by Dice, sent me a sheet of practice problems—and all of his notes from the entire year.

A welcome surprise.

My eyes flicked to the demon in question, locked in conversation with Ace—a demon with dorky horn-rimmed glasses that sat next to us in arithmancy, and from what I guessed, the only other person Wrath bothered to talk to regularly outside of our little group.

"We should probably get you to class if we don't want to be late," Dice said, typing lazily on his tablet. Finals were coming whether we were ready for them or not and even the usually lazy demon was beginning to prepare.

Saint grunted in agreement, standing from his space with a languid stretch of his long limbs. His shirt rode up a little with the action, giving me a rare look at the deep V of muscle that disappeared into his pants.

I licked my lips.

He caught me staring and smirked, running his hand through his white blond hair in a move that offered me another glimpse.

Poison shoved the rest of our toast into their mouth and washed it down with the last of my coffee. "You're right. If I'm late again Professor Misera is going to have my balls."

"See you," chimed Mouse, looking up from her screen to shoot me a wink. "Try and stay out of trouble."

“Will do.” I laughed, moving to grab my bag to find Dice already had it in his hand. He hauled it over his shoulder before tucking away his tablet into his own satchel.

“I can carry that,” I argued.

“Sure, but you don’t need to. What are boyfriends for?” He pushed away from the table as Saint grabbed my water.

Mouse hid her laugh with a very unconvincing cough.

I let out a frustrated huff. Fucking molly-coddling demons.

We walked together, my anxiety rising as we made our way out of the dorms and outside. It was like I could feel eyes on me, anticipation clinging to the frosty air like our breath that puffed out in front of us.

The three demons boxed me in like bodyguards, moving in unison as we walked. By the time we reached the doorway of my lecture, I’d had enough.

I turned with my hands on my hips. “I don’t need babysitters.”

I took my bag from Dice’s waiting hands, narrowing my eyes at his quiet noise of protest.

“Saint actually has this class with me and he’s more than capable of walking me on his own.”

“But—” Dice began to argue but I cut him off with my raised hand.

“I’m not defenceless and I don’t need you all hovering around me, it’s stressing me the fuck out.”

“Precious,” Poison reasoned, finding the cardboard container of his cigarettes in his pocket. “It’s natural that we’re worried.”

“Aren’t you going to start losing ranks if you don’t get back to your regular lives?”

Dice and Poison both shifted uncomfortably, not meeting my eye. Saint, on the other hand, leaned against the wall—apparently content to let the scene play out.

“Well...” Poison started, rubbing the back of their neck. “I don’t want to do anything that—”

“Poison, sex work is work, what you do for work isn’t some kind of weird cheating-on-me scenario. As long as you still want to make deals that way, I’m cool with it.”

Dice scratched at the short bristles of his undercut, the long top section of his hair in a familiar knot. “Well that’s not—”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” I deadpanned.

Dice changed tactic immediately. “What if Lucky—”

“Lucky is *my* problem to deal with,” I replied coolly.

“Talon,” Saint warned, his voice a low growl.

“No. If it becomes something I can’t handle, I’ll talk to you about it. But until I do, treat me like normal. I’m not some fragile thing that needs protecting. Or did you forget that Lucky’s out for revenge because I *murdered* him?”

Dice sighed, pulling me in for a tight hug and bending to feather a kiss over my temple. “You’re right. But he’s like a wounded animal. What if he —”

“Careful,” I warned him quietly enough the others couldn’t hear. “I think you’re starting to forget what this is.”

Dice released me like he’d been burned, his face fixing into a cool mask that was so Wrath-like the back of my neck heated.

“See you later, *babe*,” he drawled, turning and stalking away with his shoulders tight. He didn’t smile. Didn’t look back.

Poison and Saint shared a look that said I was starting to lose my ‘*sure thing*’.

I bit my lip, guilt roiling my insides. I shouldn’t push him like that. But I couldn’t afford our company to get the wrong idea about what was going on here.

Even if—I shook the thought from my mind.

I cleared my throat. “He’s a good actor, isn’t he?”

“Very believable,” Poison said, looking after Dice with a sour expression.

“Come on, Brim will be a nightmare if we’re late,” Saint said, nudging me towards the door. “Bye, shapeshifter.”

Poison kissed me quickly on the cheek. “I’ll see you in gym, okay?”

“Of course. Have a good morning.”

They pulled a cigarette from the box in their hands, lighting it in the hall as they walked away.

Saint and I didn’t waste time as we claimed our usual seats in the front of the room.

“You aren’t off the hook either,” I grumbled, pulling out my books.

“I know,” he said mildly, tucking a piece of hair behind my ear. “Have some grace, angel. We have reason to be a little overprotective.”

“Saint, I can handle myself,” I insisted.

“I never said you couldn’t. I think you’re extremely capable of defending yourself, Talon. But you don’t need to; that’s what we’re here for.” He put his hand over mine for a gentle squeeze.

I opened my mouth to argue, my train of thought derailed when Riot slammed into the chair beside me, her jaw set and eyes fixed on the chalkboard at the front of the room.

I nudged her with my knee. “You can sit with us at breakfast if you want, you know.”

“I know,” she said, stiff in her chair. “I don’t want to.”

“Oh, okay. I just thought—” I started, blinking in surprise.

“Well, you thought wrong.”

I wasn’t sure what I expected, but it sure as fuck wasn’t being iced out. I didn’t have much time to prod her about it though as Professor Brim started the lesson. Our projects were due this week and it was Kallum and Viper’s turn to present.

Kallum was mysteriously absent, leaving Viper to present their project alone. I breathed a sigh of relief.

No matter how I felt about being coddled, I was a little nervous to see him again. Extending that moment for a few more hours—maybe even days—was a welcome surprise.

At the end of the lesson, Riot got up and left without ever once looking at me.

Saint raised an eyebrow. “I thought you two worked things out?”

“I thought so too,” I muttered, staring after her.

TALON

TWENTY TWO

I didn't see Riot for the rest of the day, not even at mealtimes.

The next morning my breakfast was delivered as usual, but—outside of coffee and toast with raspberry jam—Riot was as inaccessible as she'd been before our talk. Even more, if that was possible.

If there was one thing that pissed me off, it was being avoided. Especially when I didn't know *why*.

Ricci's didn't avoid problems, we dealt with them head-on by any means necessary. I wouldn't let Riot blow me off without talking about it, not fucking happening.

Not to mention—I really hated to admit it—I *missed* Riot. Her biting remarks and awkward attempts to try and be friendly when it obviously came so unnatural to her had stopped being a puzzle I wanted to figure out, transforming into the little quirks that made her so special to me.

Dice slowly secured the hand wrap around my open palm and fingers, a frown creasing his brow. "This is crazy."

"Are you going to try and talk me out of it?"

"Absolutely not, and not just because I think watching you two go at it will be hot. I have a feeling that telling you what to do would be a waste of my breath."

"It would," I agreed.

Dice sighed heavily. "Riot—" He paused, checking that the wrap was secure. "She's... more tender than people give her credit for. But once you step foot into that arena, you can't take that back, Talon. Are you sure about this?"

“Yes,” I gritted out. “She’s iced me out long enough and I’m sick of this song and dance where she gets close and then fucks off. If she won’t communicate with words like grown-ups then we’re going to use our fists like children.”

Dice’s long top section of hair was twisted into a combination of thin braids and a ponytail. Dark kohl smudged around his violet eyes, smokey and sensual as he leaned in close to my face. “Don’t get hurt. I don’t want to have a problem with Riot, too.”

Dangerous. Both for me and for our bet.

“Going to defend my honour?” I teased a little breathlessly as he straightened from where he was kneeling to help me.

“Obviously.” Dice took my hands in his, looking down at me seriously. “Be careful, Talon. Don’t try anything flashy. Riot—” He broke off, looking over my head through the chain link fence. “She isn’t herself in the ring.”

“Are you going to bet on me?”

“You have terrible odds,” Dice mused. “But I will. You know, not many people would go this far to squash beef with Riot.” He tilted his head, studying my face. “I’ve waited a long time for someone to care about her like I do.”

“You’re making it more than it is. I don’t—”

“Sure,” the demon mocked, rolling his eyes. “That’s why you took the time to patch her up—yeah don’t think she didn’t tell me about that. We’ve been friends for a long time. ”

I scoffed. “That wasn’t because I liked her. I didn’t know her then.”

“You didn’t *then*. But I think... I think you’re starting to get it.”

From where we were under the perforated walkways that housed the restless crowd, spilled beer dripping through the holes and pooling in sticky puddles on the cracked cement floor, we were nearly completely hidden from view of the spectator deck. Which meant when Dice leaned forward to kiss me, his hand cupping the back of my head as his lips moved against mine, it wasn’t for show.

It was *real*.

He tasted masculine, heady allspice and deep bourbon that warned I would be drunk on him if given the chance. We traded slow passes of our mouths, content, for the moment, just to kiss. To lose ourselves to the

simmer of chemistry that'd burned between us since the moment he'd protected me from sharing my name.

We broke apart reluctantly at the sound of the buzzer—warning that I only had a minute to get into the ring before I'd be disqualified.

This fight wasn't completely without risk; I'd needed to wager most of the rank points I'd managed to earn with my good grades for the buy-in.

I'd been to fights like this a couple of times before. Wes was pretty partial to the underground ring that was run by the Esposito brothers, a rival gang out of Long Island. I even had a scar on my ribs from when we'd been jumped after a particularly spectacular winning streak—fucker nearly punctured my lung.

"Be careful," Dice insisted urgently, his thumb tracing over my lower lip. "Don't get too beat up—" He breathed in sharply, gaze hardening as he released my face like he suddenly realised what he'd been doing. "I mean, we have a game tomorrow. You need to be in good condition." He cleared his throat and backed away.

I missed the contact immediately.

Pushing those confusing feelings aside, I turned and scrabbled up the fence, dropping down onto the dirt floor of the arena with a smooth, practised motion.

Blood splattered the ground from Riot's last challenger—a lanky girl with a lip ring who had to be carried out by Chips and Spinner—the smell of stale sweat and copper making my eyes water.

Riot turned almost in slow motion, the sclera of her eyes lost to darkness.

Fear skated down my spine—the uptick of adrenaline pumping through my veins as good as a shout of warning.

What the fuck am I doing?

My mistake stuttered through me way too late; we were roommates for fucksakes, I could've just waited in her bed until she came home. She'd have to eventually—*right?*

But I didn't operate like that, I wanted to meet Riot head-on where she would be most comfortable. That meant here. The noise. The danger. *The Pit.*

Once I'd marked my name on the roster—once I set foot in the ring, I'd already lost rank points. And I couldn't afford to just run away. I needed to at least try to win.

Riot used the back of her hand to wipe her cheek, smearing blood over the corner of her mouth. I wasn't sure if it belonged to her or one of the three others I'd watched her beat into submission tonight.

Her busted knuckles flexed, an eerie smile spreading across her beautifully dangerous face.

"Little mate, what are you doing here?"

"Kicking your ass," I replied smoothly, approaching with slow steps.

I knew a wild animal when I saw one. And if I knew anything about Riot, it was that this little stunt would go one of three ways:

1) She'd beat my ass viciously in front of all these people, and I'd have hung myself with my own over-confident rope.

2) She'd refuse to fight me, and I'd win some considerable rank points but be no closer to figuring out what the fuck her problem was.

3) We would fight, and I would win, knocking some sense into her.

Her shoulders were relaxed, a predator sizing up its meal.

"You've been avoiding me," I said flatly to hooting and whistles from above.

"Have I?" she asked coolly, her voice distorted—tinny like it had travelled through one of those playground telephones. "Can't say *I've* meant to."

I was close enough now that she was in range of my longer arms. I made to circle her, the two of us falling into step easily. "That's bullshit and you know it."

"You don't know anything about me," she rasped, voice thick with tension. "But you will."

"Don't I?" I asked, lunging forward with a punch aimed at her jaw. Riot stepped fluidly out of the way, evading the attack and I staggered, slipping back into our casual pace.

I needed to test her reflexes. As much as I postured, I honestly wasn't sure if I could beat her in a fight.

Riot was strong and fast, but so was I; it was her complete disregard for her own well-being that made her so dangerous in the ring.

"I won't forfeit," she warned.

"Don't you dare," I snapped. "You don't wanna talk? Fine, let's sort this out the good old-fashioned way."

"You're so wild," she leered.

“If you would just communicate, I wouldn’t have to be,” I reasoned, throwing another punch that went far too wide.

I was nervous—and nerves were making me sloppy.

It made this altogether more dangerous. I was banking at least a little on Riot caring enough about me not to completely destroy me.

Riot grabbed my wrist, pulling me in tight to her chest.

Her mistake, I pulled my head back, slamming my forehead into her face with all the force I could muster.

She snarled, releasing me instantly, her hand flying to her face.

I didn’t think I’d broken her nose, but judging by the reflexive tears welling in her black eyes and the blood dripping from under her fingers I’d hit hard enough for it to hurt like a bitch.

“You’re going to regret that.”

“I told you I wasn’t here to talk to you!” I shouted, pushing her shoulder. “Fight me!”

Riot dropped her hand from her face, showing off her spectacular nosebleed and rapidly bruising cheekbone. With a flick of her wrist, drips of her blood speckled the dirt, adding to the mess like a constellation. When she opened her mouth again, it wasn’t with some snappy retort, it was with a roar that stuttered my heart with fear. She dove for my middle, taking me to the ground with a hard smack of my head against the earth.

Blood from her nose dripped sickeningly in my open mouth as I struggled under her, my vision temporarily spotted.

Fuck, that was a concussion.

Her hands closed around my throat, not quite enough to cut off my air but too hard to be only possessive as she straddled me loosely.

“I’m going to teach you a lesson about goading my temper.”

“You’re going to have to,” I wheezed, bringing my knee up in a vicious strike right to her cunt.

Riot’s hold slackened for a moment with the impact, then she was choking me hard enough that my eyes popped a little. She lifted me, slamming me back against the dirt with so much strength that what was left of the air in my lungs quickly vacated.

Thin wisps of black smoke sloughed off her body, her fingernails suddenly feeling sharper than they had a moment ago.

Recognition scored through me as I looked up at her, my lips parted on a breath I couldn’t get to my lungs. Whatever was going on, this was like

the bathroom. The force... or the... the smoke living in her body was—it was using her as a puppet.

“Who are you?” I rasped, Riot’s face contorting with glee.

“Smart little thing. Shame about your mouth.”

I did what any half-concussed girl with no options would, I grabbed onto her ponytail and pulled as hard as I could, her hands loosening just enough that I could break her grip. With a hard buck and a lot of struggling for dominance, I was on top of her.

“Talon!” Dice warned with the clang of metal that told me he’d hit the fence.

Riot’s fist connected with the side of my head, hitting me hard enough in the orbital socket that I worried she’d shattered it. Blood dripped down my face. She scratched and bit like a wild animal, the black of her sclera warning me that what I was up against was no longer the broody introvert that I’d come to like.

There was so much noise above us that I barely heard the soft whine at the back of her throat.

Missed the way she seemed to flicker with my compromised vision from the blood pouring into my eye. The rushing in my veins and the burn of my lungs overriding the sensation of her controlling—no longer punishing—hold.

“I’m not fucking scared of you,” I spat, her blood metallic on my tongue.

My eye was throbbing, and my windpipe definitely bruised as I took in ragged gulps of air, each breath more painful than the last.

She smiled, an eerie, blood-soaked thing that sent my heartbeat into overdrive.

“I’m not scared of you,” I repeated, my breaths coming uneven, panting.

“You should be, little mate.” She surged forward, her teeth sinking into my collarbone with enough force that it broke the skin. I screamed, pushing at her with all the strength I had when the sounds of heavy footsteps approaching drew my attention.

“Don’t!” I shouted at Dice, aiming punches at Riot’s kidneys. “This is —*BASTA!*—motherfucker that hurts!” I shrieked, the pain of my injuries seeming to double in the time it took for her to release me. I rolled off of her, staggering to my feet with my hand applying pressure to the wound.

Deep, prideful satisfaction filled me. Curling through my stomach and cradling my heart like a newborn.

Riot launched herself at me immediately, springing up from the ground and aiming for my middle. I sidestepped her, aiming a hard kick to her back that knocked her to her hands and knees.

The world was swimming, my legs buckling under me.

What the fuck is happening to me?

I definitely had a concussion and was bleeding like a son of a bitch from my bite wound. My feelings and thoughts were muddled, difficult to keep on track. If I hadn't seen it so clearly before in the bathroom, I'd think the smoke beginning to envelop us was my own imagination, born from my confusion and blood loss.

My hands scrabbled at the ground, as I tried to catch my breath. My heart was racing so fast I thought it would explode from my chest.

"That wasn't nice," I hissed through gulps of air. "I have arteries there."

"Talon—" Dice shouted. "Tap out!"

"Oh fuck off," Riot grunted, pushing herself to her feet. Her steps were slow as she made her way to me, not from injuries, but like she was fighting with all her might not to take them at all.

I steadied myself with my free hand, panting. "I'm not scared," I said again, even as a fresh wave of terror sliced through me—mingled with nonsensical excitement.

The feelings swirled around inside my head, forcing my body to react. I couldn't make sense of it, I'd never been afraid of her before. What changed?

Riot's eyes swam between dark and light.

She cradled my face in her hands, making my damaged eye socket scream with pain. "Talon—I can't control—!" For a moment, her voice was clear, unburdened. Her eyes were wide and bright with the fear that echoed in my own heart.

I closed my eyes tightly against the way her face swam, trying to breathe through the anxiety.

Smoke curled around me like a cocoon, dampening the noise in the arena to a dull hum. It was almost comforting. Like being wrapped in a blanket after an extremely hard day.

I'd started to get myself under control, the otherness of the emotions tangible enough that I could push them away. Two distinct lines of feeling outside of my own.

When Riot spoke again, I knew it wasn't her. "Are you scared?"

Not trusting my voice, I shook my head resolutely.

I didn't know this being living under Riot's skin, only saw what happened after it had its way—using her body to exert its will. I swallowed hard, making the decision in an instant.

How could I praise the others for what made them special and turn away from Riot?

She deserved my time and patience as much as Poison or Saint.

I opened my eyes and pushed forward, my mouth meeting hers in a frantic crush of lips and teeth. Pleading. *Possessive*.

Riot stiffened before she relaxed, her hand met the earth, once, twice, three times.

She forfeited. I'd won the fight.

When I pulled away, a string of saliva and blood still connected our mouths. Riot's gaze—back to the golden brown of freshly baked bread that I recognised—was troubled as she dragged her hands over my body. "No, no, no, no, no—"

"It's okay," I murmured, carding my hand through her hair. "I'm okay."

Not entirely true, but I didn't think that telling her otherwise would be very helpful.

My stomach had soured with a mix of horror and disgust.

She grabbed the front of my shirt, pulling me tight to her chest, her face buried into my hair. Her finger's passed over the bite wound, already starting to slowly knit itself back together. "Talon—I'm so sorry—I didn't—we didn't—"

My hand passed down her spine comfortingly. "I told you I wasn't scared."

"We could have killed you."

"But you didn't." I closed my eyes, my head pounding. "*Amore*, it's okay."

"It's not—what the fuck is wrong with you? I was trying to protect you! It's what's best for you—"

I pulled back enough to meet her eye. “You don’t get to decide what’s best for me. I decide that.”

Riot’s mouth worked wordlessly for a few long moments before she gritted her teeth. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

I wanted to tell her she wouldn’t, but given the beating I just took I couldn’t say it truthfully. Instead, I kissed her gently, offering her a weak smile. “Let’s go get cleaned up, ‘kay?”

“There is something seriously wrong with you,” Dice muttered, coming to meet us. “Are you okay to walk? Wrath is on his way.”

Riot tensed, her arms locking around me like she was trying to protect me from Dice. “Can he meet us in our room? If he’s going to scream at me, I’d rather it be in private.”

Dice laughed hollowly. “Yeah, good luck with that. Here, drink this.” He unscrewed the cap and handed me a bottle of what looked like a sports drink.

I took it gratefully, took a long drink and nearly spat it directly back out. It tasted like a mix of what I could only guess was cat piss and pecan pie.

“What the fuck is this?” I choked, scrubbing my tongue on my arm.

“It’ll help you heal faster,” he grunted. “Sorry, I forgot to tell you about the taste.”

I scowled up at him and he shrugged.

Riot took the bottle from my hand, tipping a generous amount into her mouth and swallowing with a grimace.

Dice’s eyes travelled up to the onlooking crowd. The explosion of noise as the fight was won died back into the clamour of too many people talking at once, their attention on getting drinks, making bets, and collecting winnings.

“Thanks,” Riot murmured gratefully.

“It wasn’t for you.” He glowered.

With a little shuffling, we made it to our feet. I leaned against Dice, letting him support my weight while I was still too light-headed to trust myself.

“Where does Wrath go on Friday nights anyway? I swear I hardly ever see him on campus on the weekends—except for when there’s a game.” I was babbling to keep myself awake, exhaustion making my muscles heavy.

I felt cautiously for the panic I'd tucked away, finding a low simmer of curiosity, then distrust. Followed by a thin thread of disgust and worry.

"Home," Dice said as we wound through the trees towards the dorm. "He has a lot of family stuff he has to do when he's not in class."

"He won't like you telling her his business," Riot muttered.

"Maybe you should worry about yourself," Dice snapped.

I was too tired to deal with their arguing. I took the bottle of disgusting liquid back from Riot and chugged it with a belch that made me gag.

Fucking. Gross.

It was slow going to get across campus, when we finally got upstairs all I wanted was a shower and sleep—a pipe dream that went up in flames at the sight of the three incredibly pissed-off demons waiting for us.

Poison got to me first, pulling me in for a hug that made me wince. "Are you okay?"

I scoffed. "I won; of course I'm okay."

Poison and Saint shared a look that told me they knew I was lying through my teeth.

The pair of them had been spending more time together as exams got closer. Saint favouring the warm, quiet windows of the library for his revision—Poison's favourite hiding spot. It was a fast-made and easy friendship.

Saint sat at the window seat, his long legs out in front of him and his arms crossed, expression flat. But it was Wrath who was vibrating with rage, his usually cool mask snapped as he abruptly stopped his pacing.

"What the hell were you thinking?" His voice cracked like ice, cold and unforgiving.

"I'm—" I started to apologise, bowing under the force of his anger.

"Not *you*," he snarled, his eyes on Riot. "You've been letting that *thing* out?"

Riot met Wrath's eye. To her credit, she didn't tremble. I was shaking like a leaf.

"He's never been like that before," she croaked. "I don't know what —"

"She bit her," Dice rushed out, like any of them could've missed the bite marks over my collarbone.

Wrath's entire body froze, his eyes flicking between Riot and I. "What?"

“He bit her,” Riot corrected, running a hand over her hair. “I—I—I don’t know what happened. I couldn’t get it back in the cage.”

“It bit her,” Dice repeated and Riot nodded.

He kicked the trunk at the end of Poison’s bed, his voice exploding. “What the fuck did I tell you about getting involved?”

Wrath, ever perfect, totally controlled Wrath, had completely lost the plot. He made a move towards Riot, his hands raised as if to strike. Without thinking, I moved in front of her, anger boiling through my veins.

No. Mine.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Wrath snarled, coming so close to my face that I could feel the heat of his fury.

I blinked. “I don’t know.”

“There’s no use lying to them,” Riot muttered quietly, rubbing her chest. “Not if—”

“If this gets out... *I told you to keep the fuck away from her.*” Wrath’s green eyes were troubled as they landed on me. “How do you feel?”

“I’m fine. That gross potion—”

“Elixir,” Dice corrected.

“—Dice gave me patched me right up.”

“Are you going to tell us what’s going on here?” Saint asked in his deep baritone, his fingers steepled on his lap.

Wrath loosed a frustrated breath, turning to glower at the blond. “I would think *you*, of all people, would appreciate that everyone is entitled to their secrets.”

Saint’s flat expression gave nothing away. “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

Dice scoffed. “Don’t insult us, feathers. We can smell you.”

Poison and Saint shared another one of those looks that told me I was missing something, and I scowled.

“Stop talking over my head, it’s fucking annoying.”

“Sorry, precious.” Poison smiled awkwardly, taking my hand for a comforting squeeze. “It’s not on purpose.”

Riot and Wrath appeared to be having some kind of silent staring contest, their expressions changing minutely as they had an argument that the rest of us weren’t privy to.

He sighed, deflating as he ran a hand through his golden blonde hair. “It’s all of our funerals—and with a neph—”

“Enough,” barked Saint, his jaw flexing. “We’re all in the same circumstances now.”

Wrath brushed imaginary dirt from the front of his fitted black long-sleeve t-shirt. “I should preface this story with a warning that all the people who are aware of it are currently in this room. So, if word gets out, I know *exactly* who is to blame.” His eyes swept over Saint, Poison, and me.

My breath caught under his lingering gaze, the fathomless pools of jade that were still tight with barely contained fury.

Riot cleared her throat, her posture tense and uncomfortable.

“When a mortal soul crosses into our plane—*The After*—it’s not able to cross the veil between worlds to return back to the realm of the living.”

“The After?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Dice chimed in, leaning against the door. “The After encompasses all of the potential afterlives, your beliefs and actions are what landed you here. But there are others. Heaven, of course. Purgatory—not somewhere you’d like to visit—”

“Can I continue?” Wrath asked, irritation colouring his tone.

Dice sighed and looked at the ceiling. “Only if you’re actually going to explain it so she can understand. Feathers knows this shit, but she doesn’t.”

“Stop calling me that,” Saint grunted.

“Anyway,” Wrath continued, “Riot died a few years ago. She started in our high school division.”

“Unusual,” she commented. “Mostly because not many that young end up... here.”

“Why did you—” I started but Wrath interrupted.

“After we graduate from university, Riot, Dice, and I want to go to the surface.”

I met Wrath’s even gaze, thinking about his questions about the ocean. About his desire to experience life the way we did.

“Sure,” Poison said, scratching their jaw. “What does this have to do with anything? Our problem is that Riot lost control and—”

“Haven’t you been listening?” Wrath snapped. “Once a mortal soul crosses it can’t return.”

“What he’s saying,” Dice growled, “is that Riot’s soul needed to be—um—transformed a little in order to be able to cross Topside.”

“So you bound her to a demon,” Saint said with a note of horror in his voice, his brows knitted together.

“Yes,” Riot confirmed tightly. “We did.”

“That’s extremely difficult, to bind a demon to a mortal soul against its will,” Poison reasoned, looking around the room.

“And the highest of sins,” hissed Saint.

“Yes,” Riot said, looking at her hands, still red with dried blood. Mine, hers, whoever else she fought tonight. “It is.”

“How—” I started, confusion pulling at my expression.

“There’s a bit of a ritual. We captured a hellhound—they’re practically mindless beasts. It was supposed to be easy for Riot’s soul to absorb them—but it seems like something went wrong.”

Riot swallowed hard. “Instead of disappearing, it’s living in my body like I’m its host. I can feel its wants—and sometimes—” She winced, her split knuckles clenched into fists at her sides. “Sometimes I completely lose control of it—like tonight in the ring. Like the night you found us in the bathroom. Shadow just—He’s so *violent*.”

“Serves you right,” Saint commented.

“Hey,” I snapped, scowling at him. “Be nice or fuck off.”

“Fine.” He sighed, miming zipping his lips shut.

“So—what—you just... forced it to bond with you, and now it’s fighting back?” I asked, looking at her sidelong.

Riot gritted her teeth. “Yes.”

Wrath paced, a troubled expression on his face. “I don’t understand it. You should be more than able to manage a hellhound.”

“Unless,” Poison said quietly, frowning. “...What if it’s an alpha?”

Wrath froze, his back ramrod straight. “Impossible, it was old enough it should have presented.”

“It could have been a late bloomer,” Dice commented, his expression troubled. “Would explain the uptick in Riot’s temper—”

“And the *bond*,” Riot whispered, her voice shaking.

You could have heard a pin drop.

All eyes on the room went to me, then Riot.

“What did you just say?” Saint murmured.

“The mate bond. It clicked into place earlier when it bit her.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Don’t you feel it?” Riot asked, disgust colouring her tone. “*Me?*”

Suddenly, the nagging feeling of worry in the pit of my stomach made sense. Panic welled in my chest that was entirely my own. “What the fuck do you mean by *mate*?”

“You bonded her?” Poison shouted, angry red blotches cropping up on their neck. “How could you do that?”

Riot buried her face in her hands. “I didn’t! I was fighting for my life, trapped on the inside of my own body. If I could have stopped it, I would have.”

“What the fuck does—” I started but Poison interrupted.

“Not all demons can do it,” they explained quickly. “A mate bond is a type of... commitment. Life long. It’s like a promise between the two of you to be together. It gives you insight into each other’s hearts.”

“It hasn’t fully settled in yet. It’ll take time—I think because of me it won’t be as strong,” Riot said miserably. “I fucked up, avoiding you this last week... I pissed him off. This is my fault.”

I closed my eyes, rubbing my temples. “So what you’re saying, is I have a window into your head?”

“And I have one into yours,” she spat.

“What does that mean if I flunk out of here?”

Riot swallowed hard. “Your suffering will be my suffering.”

“Selfish,” Saint seethed.

She took my hands, kneeling in front of me on the carpet. “Talon, I did everything in my power to stop this, I am so sor—”

“That night in the bathroom—you’d lost control right?” I asked.

“What is she talking about?” asked Wrath. “The bathroom?”

“Talon found me,” Riot swallowed, casting a grateful look at Dice. “I’d been competing, and Shadow took over. I managed to get myself back to the dorms and away from everyone before I killed anyone but—I blacked out—I didn’t wake up again until I was in my bed. I knew then—” She sighed like it was painful to go on. “I knew the first time I saw her that there was a problem. I just didn’t realize what he wanted. Why I was so drawn to her.”

“Can a mate bond be broken?” I asked.

“It’s extremely painful,” Poison murmured. “It’ll be like having your soul shredded in half.”

“We—I—” I groaned, moving through the room to flop onto the closest—Riot’s—mattress. “We haven’t even gone on a first date.”

Dice laughed.

“What’s funny?” Riot snapped.

“It’s just that you’re telling her that you’ve made an irreversible claim on her—I expected her to beat the shit out of you. Instead, she’s mad that you didn’t take her to dinner first.”

“I can feel how sorry she is,” I rubbed my chest to illustrate my point.

The sour taste of self-disgust was still fresh on my tongue.

My mind was reeling. I needed to be alone but didn’t know if I’d ever be truly alone again.

“I am, I’m so, so—” Riot started miserably.

“Don’t,” I interrupted, sitting back up. “What does this mean for my life? How will this change things?” I looked sidelong at Poison, affection bubbling up in my chest. When my eyes swung to Wrath, attraction kindled like always. “I—Um—”

Riot’s eye snapped to Wrath, the confusion in her expression transforming into surprise. “*Oh.*”

“I—”

“I don’t expect you to stop seeing anyone else. Or to prioritise our relationship above theirs.” She met me on the bed, passing her hand up my thigh with a featherlight touch. “I’m just as confused as you are. We can work this out together.”

I smiled weakly, gratitude pouring through our bond from Riot. I sent her back a wave of tentative calm.

“For now, I can keep tabs on her,” I said slowly. “I can make sure that—Um...”

“Shadow,” Dice offered.

“Shadow,” I grinned at him appreciatively, “stays under control.”

Wrath rubbed his temples. “No one can find out about this. They’ll kill Riot. Dice and I will get banished. And you?” He shuddered. “I don’t even know.”

Fear zipped through me. “What?”

“She’s an abomination,” Saint hissed, his icy eyes fixed on Riot. “They’d put her down.”

“I’m so sorry,” Riot whispered.

I twined my fingers with hers. “We’ll figure this out.”

“You better,” Saint muttered, leaning against the window and hissing as the cold glass met his back. “Otherwise, that thing you’ve bonded her

with is likely to devour her entirely.”

DICE

TWENTY THREE

In comparison to Pandemonium City College, Hellfire University was a joke. Not the funny kind.

Okay, *almost* the funny kind.

Talon was able to slip through the safeguards and score her first goal within the first ten minutes of the game. Plus, with Lucky off the team—putting an end to his sabotage—she and Spinner were actually able to work together.

It kind of warmed my heart to see them in practice. Even if Talon wasn't actually my girl, Spinner was making a real effort to get to know her when he could. They even had annoying “runner-only” inside jokes. Most of which were an excuse to bust my balls, but I'd let it slide since I liked her.

As *friends*, obviously. *Friends only*.

I landed on top of a small, scaled demon with a salamander-like tail with a sickening crunch—the kind of sound that warned me I'd broken bones. Ribs, if I'd had to guess by the pitiful wheeze that accompanied the rise and fall of his chest.

“Asshole,” he grunted.

“Guilty.” I chuckled, catching sight of Saint as he whipped past us. His jaw was set in a grimace as he dodged a tackle from a pixie with a short black bob and iridescent oval wings.

My own glamour felt heavy—constricting—but I couldn't make myself part with it. Like this, I was whole, unblemished. A little restriction was hardly much of a tradeoff.

Besides, I had a fucking *mate bond* to compete with now; the last thing I needed was to give myself yet another barrier. I was still pissed at Riot. I knew what happened wasn't her fault, but it complicated everything for *everyone*.

Especially since now, we needed to trust a fucking *nephillim* with her secret.

The creature under me groaned, feebly pushing at my shoulder.

"Please—You're crushing—!"

"Whoops! Sorry about that, dude! Forgot you were there." I jumped up, wincing a little at the pained noise the demon made and offered my hand.

"Uhhh," the demon whined, a shaking hand reaching to brush his ribs.

I looked at the scoreboard above us, the numbers 1-0 suspended magically over the middle of the stadium. The alarm blared, preceding the transformation of the 1 into a 2.

Talon and Spinner were absolutely crushing it.

There was a loud cheer as Talon raced onto the field, her dark hair streaming behind her in a high ponytail, hands in fists above her head in victory.

I tore after her, the demon at my feet forgotten the moment her deep brown eyes locked with mine. We met at the flags, Talon breathing hard from her sprint.

"M'lady," I bowed deeply, a cheeky grin curling my lips. "Can I escort you to the final goal?"

Her grin was feral, eyes bright. Cuts and bruises decorated her skin as much as the mud and leaves that stuck to her uniform as she mimicked me, dipping into a low curtsy. "My good sir, that would be *smashing*."

She yanked the metal rod from the dirt, and, with a wink over her shoulder, headed back the way she came.

I chased after her, my heart pounding hard in my chest.

Between Saint and I, the defence had been all but destroyed, leaving us free to move through the arena without resistance.

He was the best thing that could have happened to the team. Saint was twice the player Lucky ever was. Not just huge, but strong as fuck and dedicated to making sure that no one laid a hand on our runner. Which, even though he was kind of a prick—what with being into my girlfriend and not trying to at least be civil about it—I appreciated.

It was crazy how quickly their relationship seemed to go from strangers to friends to—*whatever*. If I was honest with myself, I was a little jealous. It was like Talon was really connecting with everyone but *me*.

Because our relationship isn't real. I reminded myself. It felt like the more I said it the weaker that voice was. Like a toy with the batteries running out, the message degraded into distorted nonsense.

We moved through the clustered trees, Talon alert and watching for signs of ambush.

She'd learned a lot since the last game. And—if it was possible—she was even more cutthroat than before. It was as if getting her head smashed open like a rotted jack-o-lantern had woken the *demon* in her.

Or maybe it was the bond.

Before I could mull it over, the rustle of branches drew my attention to the canopy of leaves above. Spinner was nestled in the crook of a thick branch just above us. He flashed me a thumbs up, a sure grin on his blueish, un-glamoured face.

A grin that disappeared as he blanched, eyes wide and fixed on a spot behind me. "Incoming!"

A blur of black wings zipped through my vision—a large body colliding with Talon's back and sending her sprawling across the earth.

Spinner dropped to the forest floor with a thud, and Talon tossed him the flag like they'd practised. The demon turned, his footsteps quieting as he closed in on the goal.

The beetle-like demon on top of my girl put its palm on the back of her head, using it as leverage to push himself to his feet—and pushing her face deeper into the dirt and rotting leaves.

My fist connected with the side of its head. Once, twice, three times until it stumbled backwards, landing on its back.

Talon sat up, spitting leaves and dried pine needles. "Fucking asshole."

I offered her my hand. She took it without hesitation, letting me haul her to her feet. "You okay, treasure?"

"Yeah." She grimaced, looking over her shoulder at the demon, stuck on the rounded shell of his back.

Neither of us made a move to release the other's hand, our eyes meeting for a few beats too long to call it accidental. Warmth bloomed in

my stomach at the contact. At the way her small fingers fit in the palm of my hand.

It's not real, I reminded myself. *A game.*

A carefully worded deal that should earn her enough rank points to make it into the next year. A deal that was likely to cost me a lot more than I signed up for.

"I can't let Spinner fuck up my shutout. I really need the rank points," she said, licking her lips nervously.

"Let's go," I urged with a grin.

Talon's fingers twined with mine, grip strong as she led us towards the goal.

"Do you want to go to the after-party together?" I asked as I helped Talon hop over a particularly large fallen tree.

"Asking me on a date?" she asked, the dry leaves crunching under her boots.

"Well, you *are* my girlfriend, aren't you?"

She laughed. "Fair enough. Pick me up at nine?"

I opened my mouth to reply as a piercing shriek broke the relative quiet of the forest.

"Merda," Talon hissed and dropped my hand, taking off through the trees towards the source of the noise—and the goal. "Hurry up, slow poke!"

I thundered behind her, my long legs helping me keep pace even with her head start.

Spinner was grappling with a demon, their offensive players clearly abandoning hope of scoring in exchange for delaying us. His muscles bunched under his smooth skin, and needle-fine spines on his back flared with irritation as he tried to get the upper hand.

The flag lay forgotten in the dirt between them.

Talon's eye met mine before she started, her gaze moving to survey the foliage above. "Someone else is here," she muttered from the corner of her mouth, her eyes fixating on the flag. "Cover me."

The moment she took a step into the small clearing she was hoisted into the air, thousands of thin threads holding her immobile.

"This is so gross!" she shouted, voice high and thin. "Did this come out of your *ass*?"

A demon with six eyes descended from its hiding place in the thick foliage, eight limbs splayed and covered in mottled brown fur.

Talon paled, her eyes wide with terror. “No, no, no, no, no, *nope!* Fuck no!” she screamed as the demon drew closer, thrashing in the web. “*Dice!*”

I snapped a branch off a nearby tree, using the pointed end to hack at the threads. “I’m coming! Hang in there, treasure!” I joked.

“*Now!*” Talon screamed, making my heart race.

She’s *scared*, I realised with a swooping sensation in my stomach. Of demons.

Would she be scared of me?

Before Carver got ahold of me I was considered, by demon standards, to be extremely handsome.

Now, it was a kindness that glammers were mostly mandatory at Underworld University.

The demon clicked its mandibles, drawing close enough to her that I could see her terrified, tear and dirt-streaked face reflected in his many eyes.

“Why are all of you *fucking bugs?*” she shouted as she continued to struggle, managing to free her arm by sliding it out of the sleeve of her jersey. She reached into the side of her boot to pull out a small object, her face twisted in disgust.

I evaded the webs on the ground, hopping from one foot to the other to get closer to my girl. Spinner would have to figure his own shit out so long as she was stuck.

The snick of a pocket knife was followed by a glint of silver in the waning sunlight. Talon hit the ground with a loud ‘*oof*’ of air, rolling onto her belly and army crawling towards Spinner and the Hell-U chaser.

The spider-like demon spun a web from its mouth, latching around her leg as her fist closed around the flag, dragging her backwards across the dirt.

I jumped and wrapped my arms around its neck, locking them tight. These spider-lady-type demons were all kinds of fucking confusing. Who the Hell decided to give them a human adjacent body from the waist up?

“Just leave her be!” I hissed through my teeth as the spider tried to wriggle out of my grip.

Talon swung the knife down hard on the strands around her ankle. The moment she was free, she made a break for the box, throwing the flag inside with a final blare of the alarm.

I released the demon instantly, getting caught up in her web on the way to the ground. Talon shivered as she approached, averting her gaze from the grumbling demons as they commiserated about their defeat.

“Need a hand?” Talon asked, her grin upside down from where I hung in the thick, nearly invisible strands.

“Yes!” I laughed as she cut me down, Spinner coming to join the pair of us with a grin.

“Way to go topsider! You’re a legend!” my friend praised, clapping her hard on the shoulder. “Let’s go celebrate—all that running around makes me hungry as fuck.” Spinner left my field of vision, the sound of crunching leaves and snapping twigs following him and the Hell-U players as they retreated towards the centre of the pitch.

I looked up at Talon dazedly, her face appearing to glow in the soft sunlight peeking lazily through the canopy overhead. “Good game, treasure.”

“Thanks.” She offered her hand and I took it, allowing her to help me to my feet.

“I didn’t know you kept a knife on you.”

“I’d be stupid not to, with Lucky walking around. Besides, I promised him that if he didn’t fuck off I’d cut his eye out.”

In all my time interacting with humans, I’d never met one as positively brutal as Talon. She spoke about violence like it had been an everyday occurrence in her life. For all I knew, maybe it was. It wasn’t like we stayed up all night braiding each other’s hair and talking about her life Topside.

I grunted, slinging an arm across her shoulders and leading her the way the others had gone. “You’re right, but I wish you didn’t have to.”

She closed the knife, pulling her knee up like a flamingo so she should tuck it back into her boot. “I’m more comfortable with a weapon on me anyway—thanks though, for trying to help with the uh...” she trailed off with a shudder. “Spider.”

“Do demons scare you?” I asked, my chest squeezing unpleasantly.

“Fuck no,” she snorted. “ But Wes and I got locked into a storage closet on a job once, and an egg sac full of spiders exploded in my face—I

haven't been able to stand them since."

"Oh," I said stupidly.

"It was so gross."

Not afraid of us—*me*—after all. Just not into bugs. I could deal with that; it wasn't an exoskeleton that I was ashamed of.

When we reached the grassy flatlands I hooked my arm around Talon's waist, hoisting her up to sit on my shoulders.

"Time to celebrate properly!" I ran hard and she squealed, gripping me between her thighs as we pelted around the arena amid hollers, cheers and chants of her name.

Even Wrath clapped begrudgingly along with everyone else.

It all faded away to silence as she laughed. "Please don't drop me!"

I took one more lap before jogging to meet the rest of the team, setting Talon onto her feet.

She met my eye with flushed cheeks, lips parted in a wide smile.

It's an act. I told myself as I gripped her face in my palms, cupping my fingers around the back of her head.

It's for the audience. I begged myself to believe it as I brought her lips to mine for a feverish kiss.

It's all pretend.

She plastered her body against mine, her tiny hands snaking into my hair as she returned the kiss with equal interest.

It's not real, a fantasy.

A dream I don't want to leave behind.

I was so fucked.

HOURS LATER, I took the elevator down to Talon's floor.

Underworld University loved two things: being the best and flaunting our wealth. This meant that winning prey matches was always an excuse to throw a Heaven of a party. We even invited the opposing team—if only to rub it in that we'd won.

I'd dressed in a smart black suit for the occasion, no tie.

I knocked, taking the time to smooth my jacket before Riot appeared at the door, her usually utilitarian ponytail gone, her hair pin-straight and

flowing over her shoulders in its place.

“What do you want?” she snapped, her free hand on her hip.

“To pick up *my girlfriend* for the party.” I grinned lopsidedly at my friend, taking in the red lipstick and generous dusting of gold on her eyelids. I knew that the words would irritate her, but I couldn’t help myself.

Even before the bond, Riot’s little breakfast displays tipped me off to her feelings for Talon. Not to mention the way that she raged every time I brought up the circumstances of our wager. She knew it was a bet—of course—but reason and Riot didn’t exactly go hand in hand.

“Riri, let him in!” Poison called, using a makeup brush to dust glittering powder over Talon’s eyelids.

“You’re early,” the human in question complained.

“Barely,” I replied, sidestepping Riot to join the room.

A better response than admitting I’d paced the floor of my room for half an hour waiting until I wasn’t pathetically early to show up.

Talon sat on Poison’s bed, waiting patiently as they painted her face with sharp black eyeliner, her dark hair curled into soft waves at her back. The dress she wore and Riot’s were clearly a pair, though Talon’s was black whereas the other was red.

The fabric nipped in her waist, tight the whole way around the curves of her body and showing off an ample amount of cleavage.

Mouse was dressed in a smart pair of pants and a short-sleeved button-down shirt with a bow at its collar. She waved with two fingers from where she was curled up on the windowsill, her eyes scanning her phone. “Information network has been dead all day,” she whined. “A couple of stories about the game—looks like a few people made bets for another loss and fell quite a few ranks.”

“Shame,” Talon drawled, looking up at me when Poison announced they were finished. Her lips quirked into a smile. “Wow, you look—”

“Don’t, it’ll go right to his head,” Riot teased, nudging me with her elbow.

I blinked stupidly, looking sidelong at my friend.

I hadn’t seen her so relaxed in a long time. The playfulness that’d been Riot’s signature buried in her bond with Shadow.

Riot settled beside Talon, turning the girl’s face toward hers for a demanding kiss.

It seemed whatever Talon felt about the bond, she and Riot were enjoying each other's company. I wondered what it was like for them as Riot softened into her, her fingers brushing along the scabbed-over bite.

There wasn't any point in hiding it; everyone had seen Riot bite her in the arena. They'd have no way of knowing that she, a human, had initiated a mate bond anyway.

It was weird, something that shallow should've healed by now. Not that anything was normal about this situation, to begin with.

"Hey!" Poison complained, swatting at the bare skin at Talon's thigh where her skirt parted. "You'll ruin my masterpiece!"

"Sorry, did you want one too?" Talon purred with a grin.

Yes. The answer came to the surface so quickly it brought heat to the back of my neck and the tips of my ears.

I cleared my throat. "Are you ready, treasure?"

She pressed a quick kiss to Poison's mouth and hopped up, as confident in a thin pair of stilettos as she was in her beat-up leather boots. "Yup!"

Riot took her hand, shooting me a glare. "If you think you can monopolise all of her time tonight, you have another thing coming."

"Exactly!" chirped Mouse, her tightly curled hair bouncing as she bounded over to snake an arm through Talon's. "I want some girl time on the dance floor."

"Yes please!" Talon grinned. "When I was alive, my bestie and I went dancing all the time—the club scene in the city was crazy."

"Is Haven still open?" Mouse asked.

"Yes! I was just there for—"

"Talon," I cut in, a little impatiently, looking at the women crowding either side of her. "Let's go? The rest of the team is dying to celebrate our win."

"Oh yeah," Riot nudged her side, a little smile curling her crimson-painted mouth. "Welcome to the top 60%."

"I'm getting there!" Talon cheered, letting herself be jostled into the hall.

Poison and I trailed after the girls, casting sideways glances at each other.

"You look handsome," they said. "Very dapper."

"Thanks," I replied stiffly.

Poison was dressed in a charcoal suit, a tie that matched their dark blue eyes carefully knotted at their neck. Something seemed—settled about them. Less anxious.

Traditionally, the post-game party would be held in the upperclassman's dormitories, but given Wrath was on the team and was—I sighed internally—a *prince*, it was relocated to the freshmen dorms.

Convenient, since I wondered how many drinks it would take before Talon ditched her shoes. It would've been a cold walk back in bare feet, even if I did carry her.

The girls crowded into the elevator, Poison slipping under my arm to take up position close to Talon's side. I rounded out the small space, leaning against the reflective wall in an attempt not to completely crowd everyone else.

The stupid lift was so small that I felt like my shoulders took up the entire thing by themselves. Or maybe I just didn't like enclosed spaces. I barely heard the conversations around me until the doors opened again, like the reception on an old radio coming back into range. Everything was suddenly more clear as I stepped out of the metal death box.

Music poured from the meal hall, the lights they'd installed for the party casting ghoulish shadows onto the walls as we headed through the crowd lingering in the foyer.

Riot and Talon's fingers tangled with each other, my friend leaning in close to whisper something into Talon's ear that made my date giggle.

It was kinda nice—seeing Riot happy after the year she'd had was a relief—except for the way it made me burn with irritation every time she and Talon kissed. At least for the time being, it seemed like Riot's *smoking problem* was under control. I could deal with a little irritation if she was going to be okay.

Inside the meal hall, the room had been transformed, all but a few tables spirited away in favour of a dance floor that was so packed with students it was a wonder there was room to move at all. The freshmen dorms were always a little overfull, given that our class was the largest. Now we were bursting. People clustered together in every available space, dancing, making out, playing cards, drinking and—of course—making deals.

In the back of the room, stations served light snacks and drinks—as well as party favours for the braver students.

I'd never messed with Topside drugs much; they just didn't compare to magically enhanced drinks anyway. But, judging by the way Chips was feeling up Spinner in line for the bar, I had to guess he'd indulged a little.

Spinner offered me a little wave as we approached, looking reproachfully at Chips. "Boss."

"Spins," I greeted, my eyes finding Talon again. Her back was totally exposed in her scrap of silken fabric, as was Riot's, her red-inked dragon crawling through her shoulder blades.

"What do you want to drink?" Talon asked, leaning into my chest. "You feel like a rum and coke kind of guy."

I wrinkled my nose. "Guess again."

Her eyebrows bounced in surprise and she laughed lightly. "Looks like dying really ruined my bartender mojo... Um, bourbon? Neat?"

"Much better," I praised, kissing her cheek.

"What about me?" Riot asked, a feral little smile slashing her mouth. She tugged Talon's hand, bringing her close to trail kisses across her jaw.

"I think you'd like anything so long as it has tequila."

"Mm, you'd be correct."

"Poison?" Talon called and the shapeshifter perked up from where they stood beside Mouse, leaning around her side to claim a quick kiss from her. "Do you want a drink?"

"No, thank you, precious. I'm afraid I'll end up working quite a bit tonight."

Talon's lower lip pouted out faintly. "Are you sure?"

"It's the perfect setting. I'm so—"

"Don't you dare," Talon said quickly, shaking off Riot's hand and pulling Poison in for a tight hug.

"I'll come to see you later for a dance if you'd like?" they said, tucking their chin on the top of her head and offering her a tight squeeze.

"Yes please," she kissed their chest through the layers of their clothes and gave them one more squeeze before letting go. "Have fun, okay? Oh! And if you see Saint tell him where we are!"

They laughed darkly, kissing her cheek. "I'll try, and I will."

With a quick nod to me, Poison disappeared into the crowd.

"I don't understand how that doesn't bother you," I grumbled, my hand finding Talon's lower back.

"It's not a big deal," she said with a shrug.

We'd managed to get to the front of the line, and Talon ordered for everyone—including a quick double-check with Mouse that she did indeed drink red wine.

"It is a big deal—I don't think many people would be as cool as you about... y'know," Mouse said, sipping from the wide brim of her wine glass.

Riot frowned. "Princess, you know what they—"

"I don't care," she snapped, finishing off her drink in a few quick gulps of vodka and soda water. "It's no different than bussing tables. It's work. Honestly, for a bunch of people in Hell, I'd expect you to be more open-minded. I knew lots of working girls, never met nicer people."

"She's right," Mouse muttered, looking away as Riot opened her mouth to argue.

"Do you want to dance?" I blurted before she could start an argument.

Talon's dark eyes sparkled in the multicoloured lights, her full lips curving into a smile I felt the urge to taste. She ran her hand down my forearm, leaving a trail of goosebumps in her wake through the fabric of my tailored jacket. "Lead the way."

I took her small hand in mine, tugging her behind me amongst the bodies crowding the dance floor. Demons and humans alike danced all around us. Most of the demons had chosen to remove their glammers in favour of their own monstrous forms, leaving the evening feeling more uninhibited than the usual celebrations.

Talon reached up and adjusted the collar of my shirt with a grin. "You do look very handsome."

"Oh yeah?" I purred, grabbing her hips and pulling her tight little body flush with mine.

It was a little degrading to wear a disguise while my peers revealed themselves. But I couldn't—*Talon* couldn't see me like that.

We ground together as the beat thumped around us, my cock swelling at the way she felt rubbing up against me. One song turned into two, two into three, before I was so lost to the heat of her eyes that time lost all meaning. Talon bit her lip, gaze hooded and arms draped around my neck. I rolled my hips against her, delighting in her soft gasp as my hand found her ass.

"You're a good dancer," I commented, leaning down to brush my lips against her temple.

“So are you,” she breathed, turning her head just as I started to pull away and catching my lips in a soft kiss.

My breath hitched in my chest as I cradled the back of her head with my hand, returning her advance with interest. I swept my tongue along the seam of her mouth and she opened for me, stroking my tongue with hers in a slow move that went straight to my cock.

It was like when we kissed at the fight, but a hundred times better. The intoxicating combo of post-win excitement, thumping bass, and *her* making me greedy.

Her hands slid down my chest, passing down my abs to rest lightly on my belt. “Dice, I—”

“Don’t,” I murmured against her mouth. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

Talon breathed in sharply, her kiss-swollen lower lip jutting out in a subtle pout. “Of course it doesn’t.” She kissed me again, harder this time, and I groaned against her mouth.

“Let’s go somewhere more private.” I panted, feeling Riot’s jealous glare on my back like a brand where she danced with Mouse. “If you want to.”

She nodded eagerly. “Lead the way.”

I led her by the hand through the crowd, ducking into the demon’s bathroom. The moment the door closed behind us, Talon’s mouth was on mine again. I circled her hips in my hands, leading her into the spacious stall at the back, built to accommodate even the largest of us without a glamour. The second we were inside, I crowded her against the door, my hand finding the lock on the third try.

Talon’s hand found my cock where it strained against the zipper of my slacks, the fabric tented with the force of my erection.

“Oh my god,” she murmured as I moved to kiss her neck, sucking a mark onto the side. “You’re huge.”

“It’s the glamour,” I murmured, snaking my tongue across her collarbone where the marks from Riot’s teeth stood out in stark relief against her pale skin.

“What?” she asked, undoing my belt and fly. Her hand slid into the open front of my pants, palming my cock and making me hiss. I grabbed her by the thighs, lifting her until she wrapped her legs tightly around my waist with her skirt bunched around her hips.

“I—Um—” I used the door of the stall to help keep her aloft, freeing one of my hands to slide the thin strap of her dress off her shoulder. I licked my lips, the thread of my attention fraying as she made quick work of the buttons of my shirt. “I have, um, two. When I don’t look like this.”

Talon’s eyes rounded, her mouth hanging open in surprise. “Are you serious?”

“Yes?” I winced and she frowned, pulling my mouth back to hers for a heady kiss that brushed away my anxiety.

“Amazing,” she murmured, freeing my cock from the confines of my boxer briefs. “Do you want to take it off? Will you be able to come like this?” She nipped my ear and I grunted, the sensitive tip of my cock brushing against her soaked panties.

“No!” I said too quickly. “I mean,” I cleared my throat as she stroked her hand down my length, holding back a grunt. “I’m good like this.”

“Okay,” she purred, sliding the other strap of her dress off her shoulder and baring her chest to me. “Then what are you waiting for?”

This woman.

This fucking woman.

I adjusted her enough that I could suck her nipple into my mouth, swirling my tongue over the sensitive bud of nerves. Talon rewarded me with a slow pump of my cock that snapped the rest of my patience. With a quick movement, I moved the scrap of fabric that separated us to the side.

I slipped a finger inside her, too eager for teasing—there would be time for that later—pumping in and out slowly before adding a second.

She moaned, pumping my cock in time with the movements of my fingers. I gritted my teeth, scissoring my fingers in an attempt to prep her enough to accommodate my size. “Please—” she panted. “Need to—feel you—”

I swallowed the pretty noises she was making, sucking her tongue and curling my fingers inside of her sopping cunt until she shuddered in my arms. I brought the digits to my mouth for a long suck, moaning at the tart flavour of her.

Like summer berries and champagne.

Talon ground against me, slicking my cock with her desire.

“Oh god.” She whimpered as the head of my cock brushed her clit. “Go slow, okay?”

“Of course, treasure,” I growled as she circled her hand around me, notching my head into her entrance.

It was slow work at first. I inched my hips forward in shallow strokes, nearly losing myself at the sweet sounds passing Talon’s lips. But I’d waited too long for this; I wasn’t going to come until I’d stretched her pretty little pussy around my cock and made her scream for me.

“Fuck,” she panted, her hands scrambling for purchase down my back.

I wondered how she’d mark me if we were naked.

“That’s my girl,” I praised. “Taking this big cock like you were made for it.”

“So—full—” she gasped, her head knocking against the door with a thud.

When I finally bottomed out inside her she moaned high and bright, her eyes squeezed shut.

I paused, letting her grow accustomed to me as we kissed. Talon had been with us for a while now, but all I tasted on her was the surface—*life*.

Something told me it didn’t matter how long she was down here. She’d always feel like a slice of blue sky.

Talon’s moan was lost as I stroked her tongue with mine, starting to move at a cautious pace. Her thighs tightened around my hips, nails dragging through the back of my short-cropped undercut as I picked up the pace, fucking her into the door with the sound of flesh meeting flesh.

She pulled away, replacing her tongue with her fingers. I sucked them obediently. I may have been holding her up, fucking her into the door with enough force that the bolts creaked—but we both knew who was in charge here. She grinned, slipping her fingers from my mouth and using their saliva slickness to rub her clit.

I adjusted her leg around my hip, changing the angle as I pounded into her, chasing both our orgasms.

“Oh my god, don’t fucking stop!” Talon gasped, bucking her hips in time with my thrusts, her fingers flying over her clit. “Dice—Ah—I’m —!”

“That’s it. Say my name, treasure,” I growled. “*Again*.”

“Dice!” She stiffened, her pussy clamping hard around my cock as she came, my name falling like a plea from her perfect pink lips.

I rode her through her climax, keeping up the intensity until I followed her over the edge. My mouth latched onto hers, our mingled moans

slipping between passes of our lips as I spilled hot inside her.

She buried her face into the crook of my neck, panting. “Holy shit.”

My forehead met the cool metal of the door as I caught my breath. “You’re so beautiful,” I praised, looking at her from the corner of my eye.

“You think so?” She grinned. “I let Poison try doing my makeup. They did such a good job!”

Satisfaction coiled around my heart at the sight of the love bites decorating her skin.

It was a shame they wouldn’t last long.

I slipped out of her, reaching behind us to grab some toilet paper to help clean her up. “Sorry, a hazard of fucking in a bathroom.”

She grinned as I mopped up the mess I’d left behind, taking care to wipe her thighs as well. “Cute of you to bother. Most guys finish up with a see you never.” I frowned as she slipped out of her panties, holding them on the end of her finger with distaste. “Nothing worse than putting them back on cold.”

I chuckled, and quickly tucked myself away, zipping up my pants and buckling my belt before taking her panties and putting them in my pocket.

“What do you think you are doing?” She laughed. “Those aren’t yours.”

“Well, as you don’t have a bag or pockets, it’s only fair that I help out isn’t it?”

She pulled the front of her dress back up to cover her breasts, fixing the straps. “I guess you’re right...”

“You know I am.” I smirked, grabbing her by the waist and pulling her in for a kiss.

The door opened, the music suddenly overwhelming as Talon giggled in my arms. I took soft sips from her lips before pulling away and pressing a finger to my lips to motion to her to be quiet.

As much as I wanted to scream from the rafters what we’d been doing—it would push me closer to winning the bet, and I didn’t want to take advantage of what we were doing in order to win.

The time I spent with Talon was for me. Not to win some stupid wager.

When had that become the case?

“Come on, please?” A familiar whine preceded the sound of heels clicking against the tile floor alongside another pair of shuffling feet.

Talon stiffened in my arms, looking up at me with her lips parted in surprise.

“I told you to fuck off, Frenchie. This is the demon’s room, get out.”

“Poison,” she purred. “Don’t we have fun baby?”

“For fucksakes,” Talon hissed, so low I was sure I’d only heard because of our closeness.

“Leave me alone!” Poison snapped. “You were a client, now you aren’t. I don’t want to do this anymore.”

I straightened, stretching onto my toes to catch a glimpse of where Frenchie crowded Poison against the bathroom sinks.

“You forget who it is that makes sure you keep rank.”

“I don’t need you to do me any favours, Frenchie. And if you want to fuck Riot I suggest you tell her that.” They pushed Frenchie’s boxed arms away from themselves and strode out of the bathroom, the door banging shut behind them.

Frenchie scoffed, her eyes meeting mine in the mirror for an icy moment before she turned and stormed out of the room, the door banging shut behind her.

Talon vibrated with anger.

I unlocked the door, watching as she pulled her long hair up into a ponytail. “I’m going to beat the life out of that bitch.” She did up my shirt buttons, offering me a chaste kiss before she turned to leave the stall.

“Talon—”

“This was fun,” she interrupted, looking over her shoulder at me with a wink. “Let’s do it again sometime.”

“Yeah, let’s,” I breathed.

A grin curled her mouth, lips slightly swollen from my biting kisses. And then she was gone.

TALON

TWENTY FOUR

If Frenchie had a single thought in that useless bobblehead of hers, she would've left Poison alone. But now? That bitch had it coming to her.

She'd had more than enough warnings, and I was out of patience.

It was time we settled this Underworld University style.

I wobbled a little in my heels, my legs still weak from when Dice had me pinned on his cock just minutes ago.

Two dicks! I reminded myself with a shiver of anticipation.

But there would be time to examine that exciting possibility later. Right now, I had more important things to deal with than my questionable sexual appetites.

I sought Poison out in the crowd, finding them close by a table filled with demons playing cards, their posture standoffish as Frenchie tried to drape herself around their neck, her lips brushing against their ear.

Nope. Not happening bitch. I am so fucking done with this.

I moved through the crowd with little care for who I bumped into on the way, the pound of music rattling through my chest matching my furious heartbeat. It didn't take Dice long to catch up with his longer strides, his imposing figure at my back helping to part the bodies in our way.

"How many times are we going to have to do this?" I said in a clipped tone that carried over the music, folding my arms over my chest.

Poison wouldn't meet my eye, the tips of their ears pink and lips pressed into a thin line.

"Looks like you've been having a good night," Frenchie snarked, running her hand down the side of her neck where I knew Dice's marks

decorated my skin.

The demon in question's hand landed on my hip, his strong fingers squeezing in warning. I ignored her dig, my fists clenching at my sides.

She could say whatever she wanted about me; like I gave a fuck what she thought.

"Do you want to hang out with her?" I asked Poison as though I hadn't heard them in the bathroom. As if Dice's hold on my waist and surprisingly comforting presence at my back weren't the only reason I wasn't already fist-deep into this bitch's face.

"No," Poison murmured, hardly more than a breath.

Frenchie scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Babe, what are you talking about? Of course we're going to hang out."

"Not if they don't want to, you won't," I ground out.

"I have bad news for you—Poison's been mine for longer than you've been dead," she sneered. "Besides, don't you *have a boyfriend?*"

Dice scoffed, draping his arms around my shoulders and resting his chin on the top of my head. "She can date whoever the fuck she wants. You think that one guy is going to be enough for a woman like this?" His huff of laughter shook my entire body. "You're fucking delusional."

"Yeah," I growled, a little surprised. Dice was a demon of multitudes today. "Now take your hands off what's *mine*, or I'll make you."

The corner of Poison's mouth hitched upwards, their navy gaze finally meeting mine.

"I'd like to see you try. Your magic pussy won't work on me, sweetie —"

"As if I'd even go for you. I only date *pretty* girls," I seethed. "Let's make a deal. If I win, you fuck off forever. I never want to see you again."

"Oh really? You must think pretty fucking highly of yourself."

"Any game. Any prize. I don't care. I know I can beat you."

Poison crossed to my side, their hand taking mine. Dice shifted, one of his arms circling protectively around the shapeshifter's shoulders.

"You good?" he grunted quietly.

Poison nodded, leaning into Dice's hold.

I wanted to sink into their body and kiss the worry from their face, but I'd have time for that after I made it clear that this bitch was done sniffing around what belonged to me. Poison was my *famiglia* in this cesspit, and

that meant there was nothing I wouldn't do—*nothing I wouldn't risk* to keep them safe and happy.

Once you were in the family, you were in for life.

"You wanna make a bet with me?" Frenchie laughed, the sound high and grating. "Sweetie, you don't even have enough rank points to make it to next year."

I shrugged. "It won't matter since I won't be losing. What's your wager?"

"*All* of your accumulated rank points," she clipped, her eyes narrowed to slits. "*And* a night with your toys."

I lunged forward and Dice tightened his hold, pulling me back against his chest with a hiss of warning. She was lucky Dice was so giant, I wasn't sure that Riot would've been able to stop me.

If this was Topside, I'd have her tongue delivered to her family in a box. But that wasn't how things worked down here, and judging by the anticipation crackling through my peers, I was already earning myself more attention than I really wanted.

The incredulous whispers varied but held one theme: *The new girl was challenging one of The Ten.*

"Treasure, listen, I know you—" Dice started quietly in my ear.

"What's the bet?" I interrupted.

Frenchie laughed. "How about a good old-fashioned game of bullshit? Easy enough for you to understand, right?"

I could've cheered. I'd been counting cards since Gio asked me to start dealing for the *famiglia's* Christmas Eve poker games when I turned fourteen. No one else was ever sober enough to keep track. Plus, it was a great way to swindle myself into some extra pocket money—and earn favours from my uncles. Merry Christmas to me.

"You have a deal."

I offered my hand to her and she took it in her manicured fist with an excited gleam in her eye. "We'll play in doubles, one human and one demon. The goal of the game is to get all of the cards into the other team's hands."

I stiffened.

This threw a wrench into my plan. Since demons couldn't cheat during an official bet, there was a limit to the rounds we could play that included

cheating—and all but removed the ability for half the players to lie about their cards.

Despite the slow drip of worry souring my gut I shook, keeping my expression even.

“If I win, neither Poison or I will ever have to look at you again. Oh, and since you were so kind to remind me, I want enough rank points to keep from getting expelled too.”

It was ballsy to change the prize while we were still shaking, but Frenchie didn’t seem to mind.

“Fine—*when I win*, I’ll enjoy stripping you the whole way back to rank two thousand where you belong.” She leered over at Poison and Dice. “You two should stretch, I feel like getting real weird tonight.”

I squeezed her hand until she winced, scowling. “Watch it.”

“I’ll be her second!” Poison rushed out as we released each other.

Frenchie frowned, her mouth twisting with irritation.

I raised an eyebrow at the shapeshifter, and they shrugged. “In for a penny, in for a pound, precious.”

It wasn’t that I didn’t want Poison to be my partner, but Dice was a more obvious choice. I’d heard rumours about his talent at the tables. An experienced player would’ve been an asset.

We looked at each other, and he shrugged. “If they want to play, we shouldn’t argue.”

Spinner pushed through the tight circle of onlookers that’d started to form and raised his hand slowly, averting his eyes from us. “If you share her points with me, I’ll play.”

Dice growled, releasing me and glaring at the demon. “What the fuck man?”

Spinner smiled apologetically, holding their hands up in a placating move. “Sorry Boss—I owe her a favour. And I need the points. You get it, right Talon?”

As much as I wanted to be annoyed with my teammate, we weren’t really friends by choice as much as convenience. A few nights a week on the prey field didn’t earn loyalty between us.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said quickly, my smile feeling more pasted on by the second. “Let’s get this over with.”

Spinner, from what I’d heard, was decent with a deck of cards. It was my good luck that he was forced to play the game at a handicap. But how

would forcing half of our team to announce their cheating impact the game as a whole?

I fought the urge to bring my thumbnail to my mouth. Poison's grip on my other hand was crushing as their nerves practically vibrated down their arm to where we touched. I turned to them, standing on tiptoe to get close to their face.

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes," Poison said too quickly, their eyes wandering to Dice. "You were fine with the terms?"

"My girl won't lose," he said smoothly, flashing his dimple and bending for a swift kiss to my cheek. "Will you, treasure?"

"I sure as fuck won't. I'd rather eat store-bought sauce than let that creature touch you again."

"What?" Dice and Poison asked at the same time, matching looks of confusion on their faces.

"Merda," I grumbled. "I forgot that you're practically Americans."

"Aren't you American?" Dice muttered.

"Italian-American." I snapped. "Totally different."

"How insulting," Wrath muttered, his golden blonde hair coming into view from around Dice's massive frame. "I heard you're trying to get yourself expelled." His jade eyes narrowed into slits as he leaned forward, voice dropping so that only I could catch his next words. "Thought I'd come to watch you fuck us all over."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I snapped back, glowering.

"I'm just being practical, princess," he replied, leaning away.

"You know, I think Riot calls her—" Dice started but was interrupted by the snap of Frenchie's fingers, far too close to my face.

"Stop flirting. We have a game to play."

During our exchange the nearby card game had been cleared, the table and four chairs dragged to a more central area so that our growing audience could watch. It wasn't much of a surprise. I still wasn't in the top fifty percent and had bet the entirety of my rank status to one of the top ten students in the year.

It was a suicide mission.

The music lowered to a low hum as students clambered to get a good spot to watch us play. I felt Riot's worry before I saw her pushing her way towards us. She stopped in her tracks as Wrath's hand found her shoulder.

“Are you sure about this?” Dice asked, pulling my attention back to his relaxed purple stare.

No. Of course I’m not. I thought as I rubbed my fingers together at my side, a bad habit I’d picked up along with the nail-biting.

“Are you going to bet on me?” I said instead.

“Of course I am. I’m not going to bet on me fucking the hag.” He grinned.

Wrath scoffed a laugh. “High stakes, indeed.”

Riot scowled at the prince, her arms crossed over her chest. “Destroy her.”

It wasn’t a suggestion, it was a *command*. I felt her insistence lick through my chest, our bond making my heart squeeze as I tugged Poison towards the table. In the time since she’d bitten me the insistence of her feelings had dulled a little, making them less overwhelming.

Picking through which feelings belonged to who was a little easier now. We could even close the bond off to each other for the most part—something that Riot often did. She still felt guilty about the whole thing and was trying to give me space. I was grateful.

My feelings were confusing enough without adding hers to the mix.

Poison pulled out my chair, leaning in close to brush a feather-soft kiss against my ear.

I sat, sorely regretting letting Dice keep my panties—no one should have to play a potentially life-altering game of cards commando—and shifted on the cold plastic.

Poison settled at my left, pulling his cigarettes from his pocket and lighting up.

My hand found their knee where it jiggled under the table, squeezing gently. “It’ll be okay.”

“Hope so,” they muttered, leaning their elbows on the table.

Frenchie and Spinner took the opposite side, the latter looking more than a little uncomfortable with the sudden turn of events. Though I guessed that it was mainly thanks to the glacial stare I could feel from Dice over my shoulder.

An upperclassman I’d never seen before stopped by the table, dropping a sealed deck of cards on its surface.

“I will open and shuffle the deck as an uninvolved third party, unless there are any objections,” Wrath said silkily as he snatched up the

cardboard box.

“Of course not, my prince,” Frenchie simpered at the same time Spinner nodded with a grunt.

Wrath’s lip curled faintly, so subtle I could’ve imagined it.

Poison took a long drag from their cigarette, blowing a steady stream of smoke from their nose before stubbing it out on the tabletop. “Fine by me.”

“Princess?” he drawled, shaking the cards in their sealed package.

“Go ahead.” I leaned back in my chair, feigning confidence as I tipped onto the two back legs. Glancing behind me, I found Riot had taken up residence beside Dice, Saint not far behind, his pale brows pulled together with worry.

It was kind of... nice. Like they’d come to cheer for me on the prey field.

Wrath removed the cellophane from the cards and poured them into his palm. “Rules are simple.” He counted quickly and then shuffled, the little pieces of cardboard seeming like they were magnetically attached to his hands. “The turns move clockwise. You can play the same card or one card higher than the one preceding your turn. Cheat if you can, try not to fuck your teammate over if you can’t.”

Cards appeared in front of me on the table, slowly forming a pile of thirteen. I collected them, catching Wrath’s eye as he backed away.

He looked pointedly at the cards in my hand, then at Poison before joining Dice.

I looked at my cards, shuffling through what I had as the other players did the same.

What the fuck was he trying to say?

With Poison to my left I would play before them every round. Wrath could’ve just as easily said counterclockwise and made this was more difficult.

Little blessings. But what was that look?

I pulled my lip between my teeth, looking at the shapeshifter from the corner of my eye.

Not being able to cheat was a massive handicap in this game, it meant that Poison—and Spinner—would have to pick up every time they didn’t have the right cards.

I wished I could ask Wrath what the look was about, he was clearly trying to give me some kind of hint.

“Why don’t you go first?” Frenchie asked, a smug smile over her dog-like features.

“Fine,” I snapped back, my hackles rising.

I could do this.

It was just a game of cards.

I pulled the first card I’d need, a single ace out of my hand, bringing a six along with it. It was a gamble to cheat for my first turn, but what were the odds another player had all three of the others at this stage of the game?

I put the cards facedown on the table with a saccharine smile. “Two aces.”

Poison sifted through their cards before laying theirs facedown. “Pair of twos.”

Frenchie laid down a single card with a flourish, her eyes shifting uncomfortably to the left. “One three.”

I knew I was being baited when I saw it. If Frenchie thought she could out-hustle *a hustler*... that was her own funeral.

Poison shifted forward beside me, their lips parting to call her painfully obvious bluff. I put a hand on their knee, squeezing gently. “Don’t.”

“Not as stupid as you look, Talon,” Frenchie snarked. “Spinner, do you plan on playing today?”

“Yes,” Spinner muttered, laying his cards fanned out over the pile. “Four fours.”

I selected the pair of fives out of my hand, laying them face down. “Two fives.”

“Cheat,” Frenchie called, an air of victory in her voice.

I flipped the cards over one by one, a satisfied grin pulling at my mouth. “Not exactly.”

She made an irritated noise and collected the pile while Poison and Spinner chuckled.

“One six,” Poison called, placing their card on the table. “Maybe you’ll have a seven in that big hand of yours, Frenchie.”

“Two of them,” she replied, putting her cards over theirs. “A bit early to gloat, P. We’ve only just begun.”

I would've believed her—the bravado in her voice was certainly convincing—but there was something in the way her lips pursed as she plucked them from her hand. In the way she didn't quite meet anyone's eye as she called out her play.

An impression, not quite a memory, pushed itself to the front of my mind. Ricky was great at playing cards. But every great player had a tell if you looked close enough. His was easy enough to figure out; it was like lying made his wrist itch.

I'd been thinking about Ricky a lot today. Fuck, I could've sworn I saw him sitting on the bench during the match this afternoon. But that was impossible. I'd tried every nickname I could think of that might've been him when I arrived and had no luck in tracking him down.

Ricky'd always been better at nightly prayers than me. I had to figure that he repented before Liam lobbed his head off.

I sighed internally, hardly listening to Spinner's turn.

I wonder what he'd think of this.

Poison and I played our cards without interruption, Frenchie cowed enough that she wouldn't call my bluff on a single card so soon. They called Frenchie's bluff on a trio of nines, their cards sitting face down on the table as they waited for their turn.

It made sense, there wasn't much reason to try and strategize when you had to play whatever was in your hand.

While Frenchie picked up, I studied Poison's body language, the way their attention was locked on the pile of cards in the middle of the table, ignoring their hand between turns. I tucked that little detail away for later. They weren't allowed to cheat in this game, which meant I would have to do it for both of us. Without getting caught.

But *how*?

A few rounds passed with no calls, allowing the centre pile to get a little large for my taste.

I cast a sidelong look at Poison, wishing there was a way for us to communicate what was in each other's hands. It would be hard to get cards out of his collection if he picked up too many at once.

Oh.

Wrath's hint hit me like a shot of whiskey. I needed to clear Poison's cards first.

It was a pretty good strategy. By making sure Poison went out before me I'd be able to focus on cheating instead of hoping that they had the cards they needed to win the game.

I pulled three random cards from my hand, declaring them as the three aces I was supposed to be playing. I made no effort to hide my cheating, taking up the mantle of Ricky and giving myself an obvious tell, touching my hair.

Spinner called me on the sloppy bluff and I picked up with a scoff, adding a shocking amount of cards to my hand.

"Ooh, tough break. Maybe I should add '*terrible at cards*' to stupid and outclassed," Frenchie taunted.

I rolled my eyes but didn't rise to the bait.

My hand was overfull enough to make me nervous—but I wasn't out of the game yet. With the help of Wrath's suggestion, I had a plan.

Poison ground their teeth beside me, their skin ashen as they looked at the mass of cards in my hands. I shrugged and offered a cocky smile. "Do you have an ace, Poison? I failed to play one."

"Yes, precious," they muttered, setting the card face down.

There wasn't a way to explain my strategy to Poison without also informing the rest of the table, so I didn't bother to try. They'd just have to trust me.

I couldn't dispute Frenchie's play after the mass of cards she'd picked up, but Spinner was definitely cheating as he announced, through gritted teeth, that he was playing a six instead of the required two or three. Poison called the cheat and the demon picked up with an irritated huff, running a hand over his buzzed head.

"What kind of game is this to play with demons?" Spinner grouched.

"A strategy game," Frenchie and I said together like it was obvious.

She hissed under her breath as I glared across the table.

"Not like you have any idea how to come up with a strategy," I goaded, playing my cards. "That's three threes by the way."

"Pair of threes," Poison said almost immediately after, not giving the other players an opportunity to call my bluff.

"Cheat," Frenchie called, realising who'd spoken a fraction of a second too late. She clapped her hand over her mouth, a frustrated growl escaping through her fingers. "Shit."

“Enjoy those.” Poison grinned, setting their hand down on the table as they stretched in their seat.

I didn’t bother to call Frenchie’s collection of fours, at this point she held so many cards it was likely she had them. Spinner, on the other hand, declared his four twos, and I called for him to pick up the pile.

“What the fuck,” he grumbled under his breath. “How am I even supposed to play?”

I played a set of cards, claiming them to be fives—despite them being jacks—and toyed with my hair again. I hoped Frenchie’s limited brain function was paying enough attention to take my bait and had to fight a smile when I picked my hand back up after she called my cheat.

Good.

She could be taught then.

Poison didn’t have either a five or a six so they kept their cards, the game continuing with Frenchie and Spinner’s turns. They tapped their fingers on the table beside their facedown cards.

I glanced over at them and when they met my eye, they shook their head slightly.

It was a gamble at what they were trying to communicate. I wasn’t familiar with them enough to have easy nonverbal exchanges like I did with Wes—we were able to run a hustle like we were yelling across the room with a handful of coughs.

Taking a leap of faith, I acted like I cheated, despite laying the card I claimed I had.

Spinner called me out immediately and flipped the card over, showing my truthful card. “Angels above!” He cursed as he picked up the pile, banging his fist on the table.

“Haven’t you figured out her tell by now, Spins?” Frenchie mocked, rolling her eyes. “It’s so *obvious*.”

“I don’t have a tell,” I replied hotly, barely keeping the smile off my face.

Step into my web you stupid, abusive, scumbag.

Poison cheated and kept their cards, setting their hand face down on the table with a relieved smile in my direction.

Their hand was steadily dwindling, which meant that they’d need to cheat more and more.

I watched as cards were exchanged, Frenchie picking up after an obvious bluff, Spinner laying his sevens down.

Poison drummed their fingers on the table, tension pouring off them in waves. “Who will you be a sex pest for when I’m off the table?”

Frenchie jumped up from her seat, red-faced as her hands met the tabletop. “I’m not a fucking sex pest!”

I played an eight, layering my three nines under the card carefully and laying it onto the pile.

“Sure seem like a pest to me,” Poison countered. I kicked them under the table and they whipped around to look at me. “*What?*”

I looked at the cards in the centre and they frowned.

“Talon—”

My eyes flicked back and forth again, more insistent.

“Cheat?” Poison asked, bewildered.

I grinned, flipping my eight over. “Not this time, sweetheart.”

“You’re on the same team,” Spinner complained. “Why would you call for her cards?”

“It’s what’s right,” Poison countered, picking up the cards with a slow grin spreading over their face as they found my breadcrumbs. “Three nines.”

“How the fuck?” Frenchie fumed. “Whatever, two tens.” She tossed the cards on the table so casually it had to be true—except that I had three of them in my hand.

“Cheat,” I called and Frenchie picked up, glowering.

The tides were quickly changing—Frenchie and Spinner with far more cards than Poison and I. But I knew how quickly this game could turn on me.

I needed to *focus*.

Keep my head in the game.

Out of the corner of my eye, a familiar crop of dark brown hair moved through the crowd just beyond Spinner’s right shoulder.

I shook it off, even as I could practically smell the shitty cologne he used to wear. My eyes were playing tricks on me. Playing cards just brought back too many old memories.

Spinner played his jacks, I played my queens, and Poison played their kings.

Frenchie was in the middle of a spectacularly bad bluff when the glint of a golden watch drew my attention again, my mouth popping open in surprise. A familiar pair of brown eyes and untidy five o'clock shadow stood in a pair of black, ripped jeans. Looking just as comfortable in Hell as he had the last time I'd seen him at the diner.

"Ricky?" I breathed, standing from my seat.

"Cugina," he said fondly, a seedy grin spreading across his face. "Can't say I'm happy to see you."

TALON

TWENTY FIVE

My cards fell onto the table as I moved towards Ricky. “Oh my god! What are you doing here?”

Poison’s fingers wrapped around my wrist.

“You’ll forfeit if you leave, just give us a few more minutes of your time, precious.”

I looked back at my partner, my lips parted.

“But—”

That’s my family. I finished in my mind, joy and bitter disappointment warring inside me at seeing my cousin again. It wouldn’t be fair to say. Not when Poison was as good as my family too, my affection for them as deep as the ocean in their eyes.

Spinner already played his cards, which meant I’d lost my chance to call Frenchie.

“Show them how the *famiglia* plays cards, cousin.” Ricky grinned, nodding at the table. “Unless you’ve gotten soft in your afterlife.”

Emboldened by his sudden appearance—and what it meant about finding out what happened to him—I cheated. It was a poor effort, my focus fragmented between asking Ricky a hundred questions, apologising, and telling him that Enzo got so drunk at his funeral that he put his toupee in the casket with him.

Spinner called me and I picked up the cards, hissing curses under my breath. Sweat made my dress cling to my hips, and I shifted uncomfortably in my chair.

“Relax, you’ve got this,” Poison muttered, leaning sideways to speak quietly in my ear. “I believe in you.”

They kept their cards, unable to cheat.

I bit my lip, looking between Ricky and Poison's hand.

Show them how the famiglia play's cards.

We only knew one way to play.

Dirty.

Frenchie played a complete set of threes and since there were none in my hand—and I'd managed to lose track of my careful counting when Ricky showed up—I took her word on it.

Poison followed my lead.

Spinner laid their cards and I started to plan ahead, counting what Poison would need in their hand to keep playing. I'd no way of knowing what they had, but I could cheat poorly again to get them to pick up.

I played my cards, hoping that they had cards for this round. I didn't have any sixes to try and give them.

Poison needed to get to zero before I could *really* play.

But how was I supposed to get them there?

A few rounds went by with no calls, the pile quickly getting out of hand. If Poison had to pick that up—game over. I was getting rid of extra cards at every opportunity, stacking them behind each other and claiming fewer than played—not to mention lying my ass off about the numbers.

Frenchie claimed to play three eights. Poison opened their mouth to call, and I quieted them with a hand on their knee. Spinner's skin had gone ashy, looking between the pile of cards and his hand with mounting discomfort.

"One three," he said like it pained him, picking up the massive pile of cards.

I breathed out slowly, shifting through my cards.

Poison had so few by now I had to guess that they were running out of useful plays.

With another sharp kick under the table, I played my cards, claiming my two tens and an ace were three nines.

"Ch—" Frenchie started, only to be cut off by Poison practically singing, "Cheat!"

"I know what you're doing," Spinner snapped.

"Is it cheating?" asked Poison. "I thought the object was to call it out?"

Frenchie glared at me. "You think you're so smart."

"I mean, smarter than you? Sure."

“Three tens,” Poison called and I grinned.

I didn’t know they’d had one. Sneaky shapeshifter.

When they set their cards face down, I waited until Spinner and Frenchie were engrossed in figuring out their next play before surreptitiously adding one of their cards to my hand.

A few rounds without anyone picking up and it returned to me. I was running out of cards now, especially in comparison to Frenchie and Spinner’s bloated hands. But that wasn’t the plan, me being out didn’t do anything for us.

“Four kings.”

“CHEAT!” Frenchie shouted, riffling through her cards. “I know I had—I have—”

I flipped the four kings over slowly. Letting each one feel like the nail in her coffin it was. She picked up the massive hand of cards, Poison laughing unkindly beside me.

“If you’re trying to count cards, you’re not doing a very good job,” I commented with mock disappointment.

She was likely doing an extremely good job—if I wasn’t cheating at every possible junction.

Extra cards. Moving hands around. Communicating with my partner.

And now *Ricky*.

My cousin grinned behind Frenchie’s back, watching her as she shuffled her cards. His hand signals were discreet—and extremely effective.

The other student’s weren’t allowed to meddle in our game, but Ricky didn’t attend UU—based on his absence from campus and the varsity jacket dwarfing his shoulders—he was a wildcard. And now my secret weapon.

Poison played their ace. Frenchie followed with a pair of twos. My cousin shook his head.

“Cheat,” I said lazily, leaning back in my chair.

Frenchie went red, then purple in her anger, adding the pile to her hand.

Spinner sighed and played three twos. “I fucked myself in this didn’t I?”

“Afraid so,” Poison said cheerfully, organising their cards and setting them in front of them.

With another twirl of my hair, like the trained poodle she was, Frenchie called my bluff.

I jumped up from my chair, slapping my hand down on the card I'd just played.

"Getting desperate? You know, I think I finally figured out when they named you Frenchie—at first, I thought it was because you loved a good old-fashioned make-out. But now I think it's because you look a bit like a french bulldog." I barked at her, and she lunged across the table at me so fast I hardly had time to pull away. My goading paid off, and while she was busy trying to claw at my face and Spinner was restraining her, I slid the odd man card from Poison's hand to mine.

Cheating at cards was a lot like a magic trick.

It was all about making everyone look where you *wanted* them to.

Spinner wrestled his partner back into her chair. Frenchie was breathing hard, her eyes bulging in her anger.

"Getting you expelled will be the best thing I ever did." She panted. "I hope they turn you into an Erros right away."

Poison's lip curled. "Fuck—"

"As if," I interrupted them. I had no plans of becoming one of the tortured and soulless. "Big talk for a girl with half the deck in her hand."

I settled back in my seat while she worked through her cards, looking at the ace I'd collected from Poison with a twinge of disapproval. I couldn't have gotten a worse card.

I'd need to get rid of it, and quickly.

Poison laid their cards face down. "Four threes, and with that, I'm out." they whooped, banging their hands on the table so hard the pile jostled.

"How?" Spinner whined, looking at Poison dejectedly. "You had to be cheating."

"You and I both know I can't." Poison grinned, looping an arm around my shoulders.

While the table's attention was on the shapeshifter, I tossed the ace under the table. Ricky met my eye behind Spinner's shoulder with an appreciative nod. Slowly, I put my heeled foot over the card, tugging it under my chair where it was hidden under the sole of my shoe.

He chuckled and shrugged, flashing me an 'ok' sign.

I'd gotten away with it.

“Now we can really play,” I chirped.

Minus a bit of worry in the first half, things were going well.

The turns went quickly now, Frenchie and Spinner had so many cards that it was difficult to gauge if they were cheating. I had to rely on what was in my hand and layering cards for victory. I cheated with reckless abandon, picking up and putting down cards so quickly that I was losing my perfectly curated count. There were a few tense moments where my hand was growing out of control, but with patience—and a lot of goading—I’d managed to get myself down to six cards.

Six cards I’d taken great lengths to hold onto. My strategy all but realised.

I cheated and was called by Spinner, picking up my own cards again. Frenchie played her set of four tens. I drummed my fingers on the table, my nerves crackling with anticipation.

The energy in the room was electric, so quiet now that you could hear a pin drop.

Against all odds, I was going to *win*.

I was going to school a member of The Ten and lay my claim on Poison in one game of cards.

Spinner played four jacks.

I played three queens, the last of my odd man cards tucked carefully under them. If I got away with this, the same was mine.

Spinner looked between me and the cards. “Please tell me that’s a cheat,” he begged.

I slowly flipped the cards one by one, the faces of the queens mocking him as I went.

“Fuck,” he grunted, picking up the cards. “Hey, you—”

I shrugged. “There are no rules saying that I can’t play extra cards. I only claimed the Queens, Spins.”

He laughed. “I’d be impressed if I wasn’t so pissed that I was going to owe you a shit ton of points.”

“That’s cheating!” Frenchie insisted.

“Is there a rule against humans cheating in bargains?”

She growled, looking over at Wrath. “You’re the ref. The code clearly states—”

Wrath, scrubbed a hand along his jaw. “Section four of the Code of Ethics indicates that *demons* are prohibited from cheating. It doesn’t

mention topsiders.”

“But—”

“I guess I was smart enough to understand the rules of the game after all.” I smirked, taunting her with the two lonely cards in my hand.

Frenchie played her four kings, her expression stormy. “I knew you were cheating but...”

Spinner played two aces and I didn’t bother to suppress my grin. I knew that Frenchie only had one in her hand, the other safely tucked under my shoe.

My trap was laid, now I just needed her to fall into it.

“A pair of twos,” I declared, setting the cards face down.

“You think you’re so smart,” she scoffed. “Cheat! I know one of those is an ace.”

“Is it?” I asked coyly, turning to my partner and sliding my hand across their chest in an absurd show of possessive dominance. “Poison, sweetheart, do you want to flip the cards for me?”

Poison breathed a laugh and reached forward, flipping over the two of clubs. The two of hearts followed and they gasped.

“Where the fuck is it?” shouted Frenchie, jumping out of her seat again.

“Well, I don’t have it up my sleeve.” I jeered, motioning to the thin straps of my revealing dress.

“W-w-we—we won,” Poison stammered as they looked down at me, their blue eyes wild. “You risked—”

“Stop,” I insisted, standing and pulling their face to mine with my hands on each of his cheeks. “It was nothing.”

I shot a nasty glare at Frenchie, who was desperately sifting through Spinner’s cards. “A deal is a deal. Don’t let the door hit you.”

Poison’s mouth met mine for a feverish kiss, their entire body seemed to vibrate as they pulled me close. “You—are—incredible,” their words were broken with passes of their lips against mine, coming to a stop as they kissed over my entire face.

“I’ve been saying so for years,” Ricky said warmly at my back. “I see you’ve settled in well.”

I pulled away from Poison’s attentions, the demon kissing down the side of my neck and anywhere they could reach as I met my cousin’s bemused expression.

“I don’t remember you being so into PDA when you were alive.”

“Special circumstances.” I laughed as the shapeshifter sucked on my earlobe, pushing at their chest. “*Poison!*” I insisted when they didn’t react, too busy trying to lick into my mouth.

They blinked and blushed, seeming to realise we were not alone for the first time as Dice, Riot, Saint, and Wrath joined us.

“Sorry, I—”

“I know,” I grinned, threading my fingers through their inky hair. “This is my cousin, Ri—er, what do they call you down here?”

Ricky’s lip curled with disgust. “Pizza King.”

I snorted and then completely dissolved into cackles of laughter, doubling over to hold my sides.

“Pizza King,” Wrath greeted, the joke completely going over his golden hair as he offered his hand to Ricky.

“Prince Wrath,” Ricky returned, shaking hands. “Took me a long time to heal that broken collar bone, bastardo.”

Wrath smiled nastily. “My bad, cousin of Talon, had I known I would’ve made it much worse.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked when I recovered, wiping tears from my eyes as Poison pasted themselves to my back.

“I’m the secondary relief runner for Hellfire.”

Dice scoffed, leaning against the card table. “Talon is first string.”

“Talon?” he asked, obviously amused. “It seems like someone is finally recognizing how vicious you are, cugina. I have to admit I’m not happy to see you here.”

“Liam,” I grunted. “A few days after you. It was Liam right?”

Ricky nodded soberly. “With friends. He outnumbered me. I need you to know I didn’t rat on you and—”

“I know,” I said quickly. “I trust you.”

Ricky’s eyes trailed over the group of demons at my back. “You’re very popular in death.”

“The good die young,” I teased. “This hang-on is Poison, my partner.”

“I take it you were the reason for the card game. Did you pick the competition?”

“Nope,” I preened, a feral smile overtaking my features. “For an information broker, you’d think she’d have known more about my skills.”

Frenchie was still looking through the cards for the missing ace, muttering to herself frantically. The threads of her temper were starting to wane, but it was difficult for me to worry with my little family surrounding me.

“You’re full of surprises, treasure.” Dice laughed. “I don’t think I knew either.”

“This is my—uh—boyfriend, Dice.” I motioned to the massive demon, my cheeks heating as I remembered what we’d been doing just before this entire spectacle unfolded.

“We’ve met.” Ricky looked between our group curiously. “How many —”

“All but one,” Wrath said snidely.

“Riot,” I motioned to the cagey brunette, and she scowled at Ricky.

“Are you the fuckface that shot her?” she growled, her hand finding mine for a squeeze.

“Dio mio, *no*. Talon and I were very close in life,” he said, looking affronted.

“Good. Or we’d have a problem.”

I suppressed a sigh. The posturing was a little cute and a little tiring.

“And Saint—where is Saint?”

“Here, my angel.” The icy blond stepped into my field of view with a grin. “I’m sorry I’m so late to the party; I needed to see the healer.”

“You look so familiar,” Ricky said shrewdly. “You from Jersey?”

“Saint’s a demon, Pizza—” I snorted, covering my face with my hand. “—King!”

Ricky studied Saint’s face before shrugging. “Must just have one of those faces.”

“I must,” Saint replied stiffly.

Ricky looked around at the group wearily. “Listen—”

“Kallum is here.” I cut him off, the mood turning sombre. “He’s a year above.”

“*Merda*,” Ricky muttered under his breath. “I don’t know what’s going on here, but I think that there’s trouble. Call it intuition.”

“You sound like Nonna.” I rolled my eyes. “What’s the worst thing that could happen? I’m already dead.”

“There are many fates worse than death,” drawled Wrath. “But there’s no need to worry. As you can see Talon is more than capable of dealing

with her own problems.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Ricky muttered, looking around our group. “Listen, Talon—I need to find the rest of my team.” He kissed both my cheeks, leaning in close so only I could hear. “Be very careful who you trust. There is something very wrong going on here.” He pulled away and waved as he made his way back through the crowd. “Ciao, cugina! Famiglia anche nella morte. I’ll see you at the next game.”

I waved after my cousin, feeling a small pinch in my chest.

My guilt over his death disappeared almost immediately as Poison’s fingers snaked up my skirt, cupping my bare pussy with their hand.

They made a pained noise, lips meeting my ear. “Precious, you said I was yours.”

“You *are* mine,” I muttered, painfully aware of our audience. “Let’s go upstairs, I need a shower. All that stress sweating was majorly gross.”

The shapeshifting demon’s expression softened and they kissed the side of my neck. “Of course.”

I looked up at Dice, hooking my finger around one of his. “I had fun tonight.”

It wasn’t quite holding hands. But we weren’t quite anything either.

Dice grinned, squeezing my finger with his. “Me too. I’ll come to get you for breakfast in the morning.”

Riot scoffed. “That won’t be nec—”

“I’m calling dibs,” Saint spoke over Riot. “Talon needs to study, and I don’t trust any of you to let her do it without interruptions.”

Wrath scoffed a laugh. “I’ve already proven to be a better studying companion than you, or did you forget who’s been making sure she doesn’t flunk out?”

“Enough! I’m tired, I’m a little drunk, and I don’t want to be fought over like a chew toy. I am going upstairs for a shower, and we can figure out my social calendar whenever I wake up tomorrow.”

“Late,” Poison said immediately. “She’s about to have a *very* long night.”

I had to be so slick by this point I was practically dripping on the floor, the adrenaline of the game—my new status in the top fifty percent—and Poison’s persistent need keying me up like I hadn’t already come twice tonight.

We'd been dancing around this since the night we'd kissed in my room. And now it was time to follow through with the unspoken promise between us.

With a quick move I stepped out of Poison's hold, grabbed their wrist and headed for the door.

TALON

TWENTY SIX

Poison and I headed upstairs, their stride purposeful and urgent all the way to the showers. The second the door shut behind me, I kicked off my heels and grabbed each of us a towel to set on the half-wall next to the showers while they threw their jacket and tie haphazardly onto the bench.

The air between us was electric, charged with weeks of unanswered sexual chemistry. That would end tonight. I knew the moment I made that deal that our weeks of dancing around each other were over.

Since the first time they called me *precious*, we'd been inevitable.

A match made in Hell.

Poison's hands snaked around my waist, their lips finding the crook of my neck with a peppering of chaste kisses that trailed up to my ear. I shivered at the contact, my sweaty, sticky skin turning feverish.

"You claimed me," they murmured, smiling against the side of my neck as their quick fingers undid the back of my dress. I slid the thin straps off my shoulders, the silken fabric falling off my body to land in a puddle of ebony on the floor.

I swallowed, a prickle of nerves skittering down my spine to match the cool air of the bathroom and turned in Poison's arms, making quick work of the buttons of their crisp white shirt. As each one popped more and more of their smooth, pale skin was revealed to my hungry eyes.

"I did," I breathed.

Their navy gaze was heavy—intense—as they stroked my cheek, apparently as unconcerned about getting their own clothes off as they were about where my panties had gone.

In Dice's pocket, I remembered, heat pooling at my centre.

Poison kicked off their shoes and socks before leading me backwards into the shower, holding me close to their chest. They turned on the water, using their fingers to check the temperature before letting me under the spray.

I hoped that everyone would be too busy at the party to find us here, almost as much as I hoped someone would walk in.

"I don't understand why," they said quietly, their hands gently pushing my hair from my face, tilting it into the water until the strands hung soaked at my back.

"I hate Frenchie," I admitted as they poured shampoo into their hand from the collection of bottles along the ledge. They massaged it into my scalp, digging their short nails into the roots until I groaned. "The way she hangs off of you, how she knows she makes you uncomfortable but does it anyway—it makes me so—"

"Jealous?" they interrupted, their expression brightening.

I scowled. "Pissed off."

"Same thing, precious."

"It's not," I insisted, closing my eyes as they rinsed out the suds.

This might have been the most intimate moment of my entire life, and Poison was standing in the shower with water soaking their slacks and button down where it hung open. I followed my impulse and slid the drenched fabric off their shoulders, earning me a slow, wicked smile as it hit the tile.

"Sure it isn't."

"It's not," I repeated. "I don't envy that she treats you like an object. I don't feel jealous when I see the way she makes you feel." My voice shook with anger as I met Poison's eye, my hand cupping around the back of their neck. "I hate that she can look at you and want anyone else. That she has the fucking nerve to put her hands on you when you've said no. I didn't make that bet down there because she pisses me off. I did it for *you*. You deserve—"

Poison's lips met mine in a demanding kiss. A clash of lips and teeth and tongues as my heart pounded in my chest.

The last time I'd felt like this about someone it ended up with them living in my freezer for a year. It was terrifying, exhilarating in a way that I usually associated with pulling off a big score.

I didn't care what Poison was. What they did. They were mine from the second we'd kissed.

I'd been too much of a coward to admit it to myself. My less-than-spectacular track record with romance was an excuse I hid behind so that I couldn't get hurt.

I nipped at their lips, cupping their face in my hands as Poison's erect cock nudged against my hip through their pants. Their tongue slid into my mouth, exploring as their hands slid over my soaked skin. My hands found their belt, undoing the buckle and yanking it free in quick, decisive movements.

When we broke apart, we were both panting.

"You said I was *yours*. You told her I—Why would you do that?" Their brow furrowed in confusion, impossibly adorable and heartbreaking at the same time.

Of course Poison didn't understand. As much as I wasn't equipped to love somebody, they had no idea what it was like to be loved either.

"Because you are," I insisted. Doubt clawed itself into my heart and I added, "If you want to be."

Poison's lips popped open in surprise. There were a few beats of silence before they grabbed me around the waist, hoisting me into the air and slinging me over their shoulder, walking out of the shower with the water still running. I squealed in surprise, snatching up a towel as they passed the half-wall and trying to toss it over my bare ass as they stomped through the bathroom and out the door into the hall.

"Sorry, no conditioner—next time—I'm done waiting." Their voice was strained, impatience licking through every syllable.

I swallowed hard, my pussy clenching with need at the want in their voice. "Me too."

Poison threw the door of our room open with enough force that it banged against the wall, a kind of embarrassed huff of laughter escaping them. They dropped me onto their mattress, wriggling out of their pants and joining me in bed with a final close of the heavy, maroon bed curtains.

"Talon," Poison rasped, kissing me roughly as their hand blindly searched behind them for the switch of the golden fairy lights they'd strung into their canopy. "Wanna see—Need to hear—"

Their cock bobbed at my hip, the head a dark rosy pink. Perfectly long, slightly curved, and thick. The sight made my mouth water.

I drank in the sight of them, their moon-pale skin, perfectly sculpted torso and abdomen, the deep V of muscle that tapered from waist to their absurdly perfect cock. It should be illegal for someone so gorgeous to wear clothes. Or maybe they could never be naked—only for my own eyes.

“Who do you want me to—” Poison started, and I snarled.

“Don’t you fucking dare. I want you. *Only you.*”

Poison’s usually pale cheeks turned scarlet. “But—”

“No,” I snapped, hooking my leg around their side and using my body weight to force them beneath me. “Give me a little room would you?” I asked, scooting down the bed.

“What’re you doing?” they asked breathlessly, doing as I requested.

“Putting your pleasure first.” I shrugged, kissing their knee, my hands stroking along the delicate skin of their inner thigh.

I took my time, kissing along their thigh until I reached the tuft of hair at the base of their cock. Glorious little black curls sprouted from around the root and thinned towards their belly button. Poison squirmed, their abs tensing and cock bobbing as I teased them.

“Is this okay?” I asked, my fingers wrapping around their shaft.

“Y-yes,” they stammered, throat working. “Talon, you don’t have to —”

I leaned forward, laving their head with my tongue, collecting the bead of salty precum waiting for me at their slit before taking it into my mouth for a long *suck*. Poison reacted immediately, their hips bucking at the touch and a soft grunt escaping their lips.

“Talon!”

“Poison!” I parroted, my lips curling into a grin as I stroked their shaft slowly, leaning to tease the head of their cock with my tongue before taking them deep into the back of my throat.

They released a soft groan, hands threading through my wet hair and collecting it into their fist.

“*Fuck, precious, your mouth feels so good.*”

I hummed and hollowed my cheeks; my reward was a swath of precum and a needy, keening noise that made my chest flush.

Poison’s eyes were wide where they met mine, twin pools of sapphire that dripped with liquid lust. I could tell they were trying not to fuck my

mouth, their hips kicking forward in shallow, restrained thrusts as I bobbed my head.

“Tal—*fuck*—if you don’t stop I’m going to come.” They groaned.

I wanted them to lose control. To bring them to the edge until they could hardly remember their own name. To show them the pleasure that could be found between two people who put each other’s needs first.

With a final long suck and a wet ‘*pop*’ I released their cock, crawling up their body to straddle their hips.

“You’re trying to kill me,” they rushed out on a breath of air as I ground my sopping cunt against them. “I’m literally going to die.”

I huffed a breath of laughter that was broken by a moan as the head of Poison’s cock nudged my clit. “You think so?”

“Yes!” they whined as I dragged my teeth over their collarbone, my lips trailing up their neck and over their jaw until they could feel my words against their lips.

“Tell me who you belong to.”

Poison’s hands found my waist, fingers digging in hard enough they’d likely leave a bruise. “*Yours*, I’m yours.”

I ground my pussy against their cock, releasing a whine. My fingers wrapped around their shaft, guiding the head to notch at my entrance. “And who do I belong to?”

Their expression was wild, breaths coming in shallow pants. “Talon—*please*—I—”

Usually, I wasn’t really interested in being in control during sex. Being roughed up a little suited me just fine. But with Poison? All that was out the window. I wanted to orchestrate every moment of their pleasure, every sensation a love letter written with careful, planned movements.

“Tell me.”

Poison hissed through their teeth, trying to push my hips down onto them “Me! You belong to *me*!”

I lifted myself a little on my knees, using my free hand to steady myself on Poison’s flat chest as I sank down onto their length with a slow movement that had the blood pounding in my ears.

“Talon, I need—” their voice stuttered into a grunt as I rode them slowly, leaning forward so my nipples dragged deliciously against their skin. “ —to fuck you.” Poison’s voice hardly sounded themselves, breathless and needy—begging me to let them take over.

It was taking every ounce of my control not to chase my own pleasure right now, to drag us both into the quick oblivion of what was sure to be a truly spectacular orgasm.

“Don’t move,” I ordered, my own voice coming out in a whimper as I brushed my lips against theirs in a featherlight kiss.

“You can’t be serious,” they whined but obeyed and didn’t buck or try to take charge.

I tucked that little piece of info away for later. Poison was a bit of a secret submissive—a fact that I planned to explore in earnest at another time.

“I am. Stay still.” I ground down on them once, dragging a moan from my parted lips. “You feel amazing.”

My thighs were shaking with the desire to *ride*.

Poison’s cock was the perfect amount of stretch and length, dragging against my inner walls with every movement.

“Fuck, so tight—” Poison gasped. Their fingers slid up my body and found my breasts for a gentle squeeze. “Please, Talon—”

I brought my lips to theirs for a frantic kiss that seemed to go on for minutes—hours. Poison wrapped their tongue with mine before sucking it into their mouth—a motion that made my pussy clench tight around their cock with arousal.

“Wait,” I insisted as Poison tugged at my nipples, making me gasp.

“I—I can’t,” they whined, hips lifting in one firm stroke that tore a moan from my lips.

“I need to touch you, precious.”

I hummed thoughtfully and circled my hips, drawing a low whine from the back of Poison’s throat.

A sound I wanted to replay a thousand times.

“Precious, *please*—”

“The waiting—” I ground out, the rubber band of my control fit to snap as Poison continued to roll my nipples between their fingers, “—Makes it—better—Fuck, you’re so big!” I lifted myself in their lap until just their tip remained inside me and slid back down, unable to stop myself from moaning.

“You should see how big I can make it,” Poison grumbled, abs jumping with the effort of their restraint. Their lips tilted into a dopey smile as they

pushed my hair away from where it stuck to my face and neck. “Who do I belong to?”

“Me.”

One of Poison’s hands left my breast, trailing down to my clit for a grazing press and I shuddered, beginning to ride their cock with agonizing slowness.

I didn’t know who was more lost to who at this point. Poison’s slow circles of my clit and the wet noise of our bodies sliding together brought me to a precipice that hadn’t been far off since I’d started this game. My control slipped through my fingers.

“Poison—fuck—I need—”

“Yes!” They moved like lightning, flipping me onto my back with eager passes of their mouth over mine. Our tongues battled for dominance as we kissed. “Tell me what you need, precious.” They trailed kisses along my chest until they claimed my nipple into their mouth, teasing the tight peak with an intoxicating mix of tongue and teeth. Poison’s fingers circled my clit, and my body tensed, my climax coming quick and heady.

But I wanted more. In the shuffle, Poison had slipped free of my aching core, leaving me clenching hard around nothing.

“You!” I moaned, my hands threading into their silky hair. “I need to feel you inside of me.”

“Come for me, precious,” they murmured against my breast. “Let me hear you as you come on my fingers.”

Poison slipped two digits inside me, thrusting and twisting while their thumb continued their assault on the apex of my thighs.

“*Fuck*,” I whimpered, riding Poison’s fingers. “Don’t stop, that feels so good.”

They pushed down on my clit, rolling the nub of nerves gently while curling their fingers inside of me and I howled my release, my nails digging into Poison’s shoulders as I rode the wave of pleasure.

Poison’s lips found my collarbone, just above the scar from Riot’s bondmark. “Are you ready for more?”

“Yes,” I panted, even as I wondered if I would be able to move.

With gentle, guiding hands, Poison eased me onto my knees, my ass in the air as I leaned my face onto my arms. An act of submission, but a necessary one. I was exhausted, and needy, and desperate all at once.

Poison's fingers left me with an embarrassingly wet noise that was quickly forgotten as their tongue licked a stripe down my slick opening.

"Delicious," they groaned. "You taste like fucking *spring*."

I shivered, my cheek dropping to the mattress. "I want to come on your cock."

Poison's hand snapped over the rounded curve of my ass, making me moan into the sheets at the delicious burn.

A sex-soaked laugh escaped them, their breath ghosting over my back as they notched themselves at my entrance. "You have no idea—" they filled me with one sharp thrust, fucking me so hard into the mattress that it stole the breath from my lungs and my knees scooted along the bed, "—How long I've been waiting to do this."

My hands scrabbled for purchase against the sheets as I shouted a nonsensical string of curses and praises—half of which weren't even in English.

"Amore! Don't stop! Tesoro! *Jesus Christ!*"

I never doubted that Poison would be dynamite in the sack—no one got to the rank they did the way they did without being unbelievable—but I didn't expect it to be *transcendent*.

"Want to—see you—" they grunted, scooping my leg and twisting my body so I lay on my side, legs splayed so that they could watch as my soaked core swallowed their cock with every punishing thrust. "Play with your clit," Poison demanded, reaching to tug my nipple sharply. "Show me how you've pleased yourself while denying me."

I obeyed instantly, playing with my clit until my walls fluttered around their cock, trying to suck them deeper inside.

The sound of our flesh meeting was erotic, Poison's gaze hot as a brand where it fell on my skin. Sweat beaded along their temple and dripped between my breasts, our joining vicious and desperate. The way it always should have been.

"I'm so close," they hissed, mouthing at my knee where it dangled uselessly over their shoulder.

The sensations were becoming overwhelming, my climax resisting Poison's siren call as heat flared in my belly and snapped up my spine.

They hooked their hand around my hip, changing the angle so that their cock hit my most sensitive spot and I detonated, my eyes squeezing shut as I screamed through the most soul-crushing orgasm I'd ever

experienced. My vision spotting and ears ringing as Poison spilled hot inside me, their body tense as they slowed their pace with a handful more wanton snaps of their hips.

I whimpered in the aftershocks as they collapsed beside me, sweaty and out of breath.

“What—” I panted. “—The fuck.”

Poison chuckled and collected me gently, draping my spent body against their heaving chest. I curled against them with a contented sigh, our bodies sticky with sweat.

“This is okay, right?”

“Whatthefuck,” I repeated in a rush, still trying to catch my breath.

“I’ve never done this before,” they admitted, breathing out shakily.

“What?” I asked incredulously. “Poison, the first time I met you, you were actively fu—”

“Not the sex,” they murmured, kissing the top of my head. I felt, rather than saw the sheepish smile that followed. “Cuddling after.”

“Oh,” I said, trailing my fingers along their jaw, turning their face to meet my eyes. “Are you uncomfortable?”

“No.” Poison’s voice was little more than breath. “It’s nice.”

“It is,” I agreed, scooting up to place a kiss against their mouth with my swollen lips. “You’re mine, Poison. That means cuddle parties all the time.”

A smile teased at the edges of their mouth that made my insides turn to jelly. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” I returned with a kiss at the tip of their nose.

Poison cleared their throat, their hand smoothing down my back. “I— Please, Talon—I want to give you something.”

“I don’t need anything from you, Poison. How many times do I have to tell—”

“It’s my name,” they interrupted, their blue eyes burning. “Please, let me give you my name.”

I blinked, warmth spreading through my chest. “But... Isn’t that what gives a human control over you? Would that mean—”

“It doesn’t matter to me, Talon.” Poison stroked my cheek tenderly, their thumb brushing my lips. “I don’t care what you do with it. I’m yours. Bend me to your will. Use me how you see fit. Ask anything of me.” They

laughed softly, pressing a kiss to my mouth. “Throw me away if you choose. I need you to know it. To know me.”

I swallowed hard around the sudden lump in my throat. “What is it?”

“Alba.”

I was quiet for a moment, my fingers carding through the strands of their raven hair where it fell into their face as a smile tugged at the corner of my mouth. “Sunrise.”

“Hm?” Poison hummed, kissing the corner of my mouth.

“In Italian, *alba* means sunrise.”

A faint blush touched the tips of Poison’s ears. “Oh yeah?”

“Hey, Alba?”

“Yes, precious?”

My heart kicked into overdrive in my chest, knocking against my ribs painfully with my nerves. I’d thought the words to myself a few times in the last week. But saying them out loud—especially after how spectacularly it’d backfired on me the last time was terrifying.

But this was different. Poison—*Alba*—was different. The promise of sunlight after all the darkness.

I fought the urge to hide my face as Poison shifted, using one arm to hold themselves over me. “Precious?”

“I love you,” I murmured, my hand finding its home on the side of the demon’s cheek.

Their smile was incandescent, colour pinking their cheeks. “I love you too.”

TALON

TWENTY SEVEN

It turned out that shapeshifting sex demons don't require much downtime between rounds, a fact I should've considered when I'd agreed to meet Saint to study the next morning.

I shifted in the hard library chair uncomfortably, my swollen sex and sore thighs protesting.

"Are you okay?" Saint asked, raising an eyebrow. "You've been wincing all morning."

I smiled stiffly. "Peachy."

Saint narrowed his icy eyes, his lips tilting into a bemused smile. "We could take a break."

"No, really, I'm fine," I insisted, even as I hoped he'd tell me we'd done enough and I was good to crawl my way back to the dorm for some sleep, pizza, and water. Maybe not in that order.

He slid my tablet away to the other side of the table and grabbed my chair, turning it towards him so that he could frame my legs with either of his.

"You look exhausted. Did Poison let you sleep at all last night?"

"Of course they did," I lied, my body flushing with arousal as I remembered the sex marathon that repeatedly whispering their name into their ear had earned me. "*Anyway*," I changed the subject obviously, leaning forward to toy with Saint's jacket.

It'd been a while since we were alone like this, and though I was well and truly spent, I couldn't resist touching him. His warmth seeped through his clothes and into my fingers, inviting me closer as he breathed a laugh. "I actually have something I want to ask you."

“Do you?” he asked in that delicious rumble of his, the deep baritone of his voice thrilling me down to my toes.

I seriously needed to get checked over. There was clearly something wrong with my libido if I could barely walk and was still interested in having Saint trail his lips all over—I shook the thought from my mind, blinking hard to refocus.

“What’s with the nickname the guys use with you? Feathers? I’ve never seen you without the glamour. Do you have wings like Wrath?”

Saint froze, his ice-chip eyes wide and uncomfortable. “Oh—Well...”

Oh. Maybe this was a line. I knew Dice wasn’t comfortable taking his glamour off either; maybe there was some kind of demon sexiness hierarchy I wasn’t privy to. Or some kind of politicking that I couldn’t even begin to understand—especially not with my grade in Demonic History.

“I’ll still like you no matter what you look like under here,” I murmured, pulling at his cheek playfully. “It’s your brain I’m attracted to... And your loyalty. Honestly, you remind me a lot of—” I stopped myself before I could say *Wes*, because I had less than zero interest in fucking my brother. Negative a million interest. But I couldn’t ignore that Saint, with his frequent bouts of brooding and quiet contemplation, was a little *Wes*-like.

When I was with him, I was free to be myself. Sad if I needed to be. Happy if I was. If I needed to talk, he would listen. If I needed help, he would do whatever I asked.

It made me feel safe, protected.

He smiled, though his eyes remained troubled. “It’s... difficult for me to talk about. But it’s not a secret to *anyone*—” He sighed. “I never meant to keep it from you, at least.”

Saint leaned forward until his forehead met my shoulder, his eyes closing so his impossibly white eyelashes fanned against his cheek.

“I can wait if you don’t want to talk about it,” I offered, rubbing my hand in soothing circles over his upper back. “God knows I have my secrets.”

He groaned at the contact, circling his arms around my middle.

“And I mine,” Saint conceded bitterly with a short, wry laugh. “I’m not a demon,” he circled his arms around my waist and held me tight to him.

“I was—am—an angel. I worked as an intelligence officer until shortly before I was stripped of my wings.”

“Why—” I started, but he interrupted me like I hadn’t spoken.

“I tried to meddle in the life of my assignment.”

My fingers stilled, the sight of Saint’s back covered by his uniform making my stomach twist with horror. “What do you mean *stripped*?”

He swallowed hard. “I mean that they took my wings for what I did.”

“Why would they—why did you get involved?”

He sat back, leaning away just enough so that he could meet my eye. “If you’d asked me this question a couple of months ago I would’ve said love.”

“Love,” I repeated hoarsely.

At the look in his eye I was reminded again of the whisper of a memory. It niggled at the back of my mind when I was left idle.

Dozens of beautiful, icy blue eyes filled with tears.

“What would you call it now?”

“Foolishness,” he murmured. “Or maybe temporary insanity.”

My throat closed, the warmth leeching out of my skin. “Is that so?”

He leaned forward for a quick kiss. “Don’t pity me, Talon. I’m not the hero in this story. I’m the villain. I broke the rules and I got what I deserved. I’d do—” Saint broke off as his phone started to ring. He fished it from his pocket and looked at the caller ID, his mouth pressing into a thin line. “I have to take this. Sorry.”

I nodded, releasing him, unsure why there was a knot in the pit of my stomach. Or why I felt like crying.

When Saint returned some minutes later, he didn’t start the conversation again, insisting that we finish studying.

I wasn’t even sure if the—vision? Memory?—was real. Or if it was something I’d made up entirely.

It didn’t matter; I trusted Saint.

He’d never lie to me.

THE WEEK PASSED by in a blur of classes, prey practice, and studying. With exams starting on Monday and the final game of the season tonight, it left

little room for relaxation. Which meant I had to take my opportunities whenever they arrived.

I laid on my back in Riot's bed, using her lap as a pillow as I reviewed my notes on my phone while Riot fervently typed away on an essay like it had personally offended her entire family.

The bond shifted between us comfortably, Shadow seeming content with our new dynamic. Riot's hand passed over my side as she read over her work, her lip curled in irritation.

"You okay?" I yawned. There wasn't enough time before the game for a nap; my alarm warning me I needed to leave for the field was set to go off at any minute.

She groaned. "I thought I'd be able to finish this faster than I have and we'd actually get to make use of our alone time."

"I'm quite happy like this," I reasoned.

"Is that so?" Riot said, looking down at me with an awkward half-smile.

Her transformation since the bond had been stark. It was like she wasn't afraid of getting close anymore, her feelings as clear to me as my own.

I leaned forward in an awkward half-crunch until our lips met. "Mhm, I feel like I've hardly seen you."

She nipped at my lips, a slow smirk spreading across her face. "You've been too busy for me."

"That's not true!" I protested, sitting up so fast that our foreheads smacked together. "Ouch!"

Riot cursed and rubbed her head. "What, princess, all this sappy shit too much for you? Gotta beat me up just to feel something?"

I bared my teeth at her playfully, pushing her down onto the mattress. "You know it. It's been a while since I smacked you around, so—"

"Shut up," Riot teased, grabbing my shirt and pulling me down for a kiss. "I won that fight."

"You did *not*!" I protested against her lips. "I have the rank points to prove it!"

"We can agree to disagree." She rolled her eyes, pulling the collar of my shirt to the side to kiss at the scarred remnants of my bond mark. "The only prize worth winning belongs to me anyway."

"Now who's being sappy?" I muttered, tucking her hair behind her ear.

She scoffed, her fingers brushing the silvery marks on my collarbone. “Weird that this isn’t fading.”

“Is it?” I asked, tracing her lips with my fingertip.

“Yeah, usually stuff doesn’t scar down here,” she murmured, pressing a kiss into my fingers.

If you’d told me a month ago that Riot could be so... cute—I would’ve laughed. But right now? She was downright adorable. From her puzzled expression to the way her hair was pulled almost entirely into a messy bun at the top of her head, just a few strands framing her face.

“Are you even listening to me?”

I blinked and bit my lip guiltily. “Maybe.”

“Talon—”

“Okay, okay, I didn’t hear a word. It’s not my fault though!”

She raised a dark eyebrow accusatorially.

“You are just very kissable right now.”

“That so?”

“Ye—” The melodic chime of my phone alarm interrupted my sentence, and Riot scowled.

“Do you have to go already?”

I nodded and moved to sit up, turning off the alarm with a quick swipe of my finger. “Dice and Wrath are going to meet me downstairs. I can’t be late.”

Riot grabbed my face, stamping a string of demanding kisses onto my mouth before releasing me. “I’ll be in the stands.”

“Going to wear my number?” I teased.

She averted her eyes, rubbing the back of her neck. “I could if you wanted me to.”

“I thought you wanted to keep our relationship on the down low?” I asked, scooting off the bed and heading to the door to tug on my boots.

“*Wrath* wants us to keep our relationship on the down low,” she snapped. “I want—if you want—”

I grabbed my bag from where I’d hung it by the door, opening the zipper and rooting through until I found my spare jersey.

Riot’s expression was unreadable as I handed her the top, and she pulled it on over her T-shirt, adjusting her hair.

“I gotta go,” I warned at the slow, dangerous smile spreading over her face.

She hopped off the bed and wrapped me in a tight hug. “Don’t get hurt. I don’t wanna get expelled for murder.”

I kissed her quickly and shrugged her off. “No promises, babe.”

Riot groaned and threw herself back down on the bed, pulling her laptop onto her lap. “At least try!”

I could’ve imagined it, but I swear as I shut the door I caught her smelling my jersey.

Who the fuck would think that *Riot*, the scourge of the pit, our resident bare-knuckle boxing champion, would be into all of this lovey-dovey stuff. The thought kept me warm all the way downstairs—ten minutes late—to meet Wrath and Dice.

Who were nowhere to be found.

I reached into my pocket for my phone and found it missing.

Perfect, I must’ve left it upstairs.

They probably went ahead without me. I reasoned, jogging down the path to catch up.

I made good time to the pitch, taking the winding route through the trees. Players always needed to arrive an hour and a half before the game for warm-ups and strategy planning, which meant that the grounds closest to the stadium were mostly deserted. At first, I’d thought that games being held on Saturday was a courtesy, but now that it was only two o’clock and the sky was already starting to change colours—I realised it was so we wouldn’t be bumbling around in the dark.

It was weird that I didn’t see Wrath and Dice on the way, but I had no way to call them, leaving me to trust they were waiting inside.

I’d just looped my fingers through the metal handle of the door to the changing rooms when a twig snapped behind me. I spun on my heel, coming face to face with Kallum, alone, for the first time since he’d busted my head open on the field.

“I thought you’d finally figured out to leave me alone,” I called, my hand tightening on the door. “Sorry, changing rooms are for *team members only*.”

Goading him was a mistake. He had the half-feral look of a stray dog in his eye, his gaze never staying in one place for long.

“You think you’re hot shit, don’t you, Olivia?” he asked, movements jittery as he approached.

I could've escaped into the change rooms—the metal door was heavy and locked from the inside—but a part of me wanted to finish this. I was tired of Kallum appearing like a budget grim reaper around corners and knew him well enough that until we faced off, it wasn't going to end.

Kallum could hold one Hell of a grudge. But so could I.

"It's Talon now. Your brother made sure of that," I snapped.

Kallum's bitter laugh was paired with the snick of a pocket knife. "Good on him. Someone needed to take care of that bloated family tree of yours."

"You keep my family out of your filthy fucking mouth, O'Brian." I dropped my bag into the dirt, pushing the sleeves of my hoodie up. "I'm sick of this—of you acting like a scorned little bitch when you're the reason you're here in the first place. You were a *rat*," I hissed. "I had to protect my family. Gio. Wes."

His face contorted with anger, his dark eyes cavernous. "I was *somebody*, Olivia. You took that away from me. Then, you came and fucked up my afterlife too. And now I'm going to make you *nothing*."

My spine prickled with adrenaline, my fight or flight roaring in my ears. I could turn, go into the changing rooms and get some backup—or hide out until he was gone—but I knew that wouldn't solve anything. This was between Kallum and me. And he wasn't going to stop until one of us was *finished*.

Ricci's didn't rely on others to solve their problems. We didn't run and hide like rats. We solved them, by any means necessary.

"You were nearly expelled for that shit you pulled last time. What makes you think that they'll look the other way again?" I called, my eyes snagging on the glint of silver in the sunlight as he moved closer.

Kallum shrugged. "I don't really care what happens to me as long as I make sure that you don't get to enjoy your afterlife with your little boyfriends."

I wrinkled my nose. "Boyfriends doesn't really describe—"

He lunged for me so quickly that I barely had the time to get out of the way, my muscle memory taking over and jerking me hard to the right.

The last time I'd been in a knife fight, I was probably sixteen—the minute Gio heard I'd been jumped I'd been given a security detail. And Dolly.

Kallum swung his arm hard towards my face and I threw my arm up, the blade of the knife slashing through the sleeve of my hoodie. I kicked out hard, catching him in the stomach. He doubled over on instinct and I brought my elbow down hard into his back. He threw himself at my middle, taking me to the ground and I panicked, thrashing as I fought to keep the knife away from my face.

“What did you tell me—you were going to take my eye?” Kallum called, his voice brimming with excitement.

I snarled, using both of my hands to hold his wrist just above my face.

“Sounds like a plan to me, Liv.”

“Lucky, is that any way to treat a woman?” Dice asked, his casual tone undercut with a wave of fury. His thick arm wrapped around Kallum’s neck, tightening until he was choking him in the crook. “I suggest you take your fucking hands off my girl.”

“While they are still attached to do so,” Wrath purred in a deadly whisper, his hand closing around Kallum’s wrist and bending it with a terrible *snap*.

Kallum screamed, the knife dropping from his fingers as Wrath released his limp wrist. Dice dragged him off of me like he weighed as little as a ragdoll.

I stayed where I was, panting on the ground as my blood thundered in my ears.

That was way too close, even for me.

Wrath leaned over me, blocking my view of the hazy red sky as he offered his hand. “You alright, princess?”

I nodded shakily, letting him pull me to my feet. He carefully obstructed my view of Dice and Kallum, his jade gaze appraising.

“Thanks,” I mumbled, feeling a little embarrassed. Had I really gone so soft that I couldn’t win a knife fight unarmed?

“What was he saying to you?” Wrath asked quietly, his face impassive as the sounds of struggle met my ears.

I laughed shortly and without humour. “That he was going to take my eye like I promised to take his.”

“Is that so?” Wrath asked, a dangerous edge to his smile. “Go inside and change. We’ll see you on the field.”

“But—”

“Go on, treasure,” Dice called. “We won’t be long.”

Wrath bent and picked up my bag, offering it to me by the strap.

I looked between his face—scary calm like I’d seen the day Riot bonded me, which meant Wrath was one *tiny* inconvenience from royally losing his shit—and where he was white-knuckling the fabric. Deciding it was better to allow him to use Kallum as a punching bag than to blow up on me, I took it and turned, heading for the door with confidence in my strides that I didn’t feel.

Behind me, Wrath’s low murmur was chilling.

“I’m quite tired of having to look at your face, Lucky.”

“N-n-no, please—I wouldn’t have really!”

“What do you think woulda happened when we caught up with you? Think we’d give you an award?” Dice asked with a huff of laughter.

“You can’t be serious—what the fuck does she even offer you?”

My hand was on the door when Kallum started screaming, the handle turning in my slick palm as a horrific *squelch* and *snap* met my ears.

Kallum’s screams were little more than white noise as I escaped into the stadium.

When I turned to shut the door, I caught sight of Wrath dropping Kallum’s eye onto the dirt, the optic nerve trailing behind it. I slammed the heavy metal between us as he raised his booted foot, nausea rolling my stomach.

I shuddered, shaking my head hard to get the image out of my mind.

There would be time to think about it later; for now, we had a game to win.

TALON

TWENTY EIGHT

The prey field—even though it was easily the most dangerous place I ever was at the university—was my safe space.

We were already up one point, the score sitting at a comfortable 2-1.

Spinner had the flag in hand as he dodged to the left of the Devil's Landing University captain—a female demon with gorgeous, iridescent amethyst-coloured hair even longer than mine—headed directly for the box.

I tackled the girl to the dirt from behind, wrestling her onto the dried leaves with a grunt of effort. “Sorry, gorgeous,” I flirted. “Can’t have you going anywhere.”

She laughed, a melodic noise that reminded me of the rare times I’d heard Riot do it. “I guess I’d rather it be you than him.” She struggled, though not very hard, clearly aware that the game was already won.

My teammate dropped the flag into the box and the alarm blared, the stadium bursting into screams and applause. This was the last game of the semester, and with this win, we were in the semi-finals for the year.

I hopped off the demon, offering my hand to pull her up. “Good game.”

She grinned and took it, letting me haul her to her feet. “My sister is on the Pandemonium team. She told me that you were good.”

Spinner came to meet us, slinging an arm over my shoulder with a smirk. “Talon is going to be the first human in the pro league, mark my words.”

“Talon?” The girl grinned, looking me over appraisingly. “How fitting.”

“I like to think so,” I grinned, knocking my knuckles against Spinner’s. “And you are?”

She snorted. “Storm.”

“Y’know, I don’t remember your sister.” I raised an eyebrow, the three of us making good time towards the field. I would’ve remembered a demon with gemstone-coloured hair; it was so rare that our opponents weren’t absolutely horrifying.

“Oh,” she laughed. “I thought you would. She said she had you pretty *tied up*.”

I blinked and shuddered. “The spider.”

“One and the same.”

Spinner ran a hand through his hair, cutting me a pointed look.

“This is Spinner.” I introduced the two as we breached the treeline, lowering my voice to a mock whisper. “He’s cuter with his glamour on.”

Storm snickered, looking at my friend with interest. “Is that so?”

Dice pelted across the field for us, snatching me by the waist and hauling me over his shoulder for a victory lap.

“She didn’t even score the winning point!” Spinner complained after us as I squealed, Dice’s hand landing on my ass.

I hunted the crowd for Riot, finding her in the lower bowl, wearing my jersey with pride.

We didn’t waste much time celebrating with the team; there would be ample time for that at the party tonight. Instead, I wriggled in Dice’s hold until he let me down and made my way for the side of the field where Riot was jogging to meet me. We met in the middle, her fingers digging into my hair as she sealed her mouth against mine for a kiss.

“Hey babe,” I purred quietly to her. Seeing her with my name on her back was doing all kinds of things to my insides. “Nice shirt.”

“I felt you flirting, dickhead,” she growled against my mouth, her hand sliding from my ponytail to rest on our bond mark.

My insides warmed at the contact, even through the fabric. Shadow, Riot, and I singing through each other in the bond.

“I was just trying to keep her off her guard,” I countered. “Are you jealous?”

Riot scoffed and turned, pulling her hair to the side to show off my name—Talon—emblazoned on her back, my number, 13, just below it. “I know who you belong to.”

I snatched her around her waist, dragging her back to my front as I kissed down the side of her neck. “You so are! You’re totally jealous! That’s so fucking cute.”

“I’m not *cute*,” she spat at me.

“Yes, you are!” I sang to her as footsteps approached us.

“You let her wear your jersey?” Poison complained. “But I want—”

“You can’t wear her jersey if you’re playing,” Saint laughed, rolling his eyes. “You have to wear your own.”

Poison pouted adorably, their brows pulling together. “Maybe at practice I could?”

“Fat fucking chance,” Riot spat with a smug grin. “This is my thing.”

Dice rolled his violet eyes. “I think I liked you better when you were angry. This new Riot is gross.”

Her lips popped open, a scowl darkening her features. “I’m not—”

“You kind of are,” I interrupted. “But I like it.” I squeezed her hard and she shot me a sheepish smile.

“Good game, angel,” Saint said, passing a hand down my back as I turned to him for a quick kiss.

Poison grabbed my hand, tugging me against their chest and dipping me low for a licking kiss that had my hands threading into their hair.

“Hey, hey—cut it out!” chastised Saint, swatting Poison on the back of the head. “Let’s go get cleaned up for the party.”

Poison released me reluctantly and I took Dice’s hand, walking closely with him off the pitch.

“Is it over?” I asked quietly.

He looked at me sidelong, his expression unreadable. “I don’t think he’ll come at you directly again, but I’m sure there will be fallout.”

I nodded slowly, chewing the inside of my cheek to stop myself from smiling. Fucker deserved everything he got.

“Not the first time I’ve survived a threat from Lucky, won’t be the last.”

Dice’s eyebrows pulled together with worry and I reached out to smooth his forehead with my fingers.

“Watch out for him. We—The demons can’t cheat directly, but that doesn’t mean our games can’t be sabotaged. Or that we can’t be helped by a topsider with a grudge.”

“I’m not scared of Lucky.”

Okay, that was a lie. But what was I supposed to tell him? That I’d started sleeping with a knife under my pillow again the day I’d seen him? That was a habit I thought I’d killed after I’d held his head underwater for ten minutes.

Dice reached out, the look in his eyes tense, sad as his thumb scored a long line down my cheek to my bottom lip. My eyes flicked to his lips instantly, remembering the absolutely not-for-bet kiss that we shared a couple of weeks ago. And the stolen minutes in the bathroom that followed.

My heart squeezed.

“You have a target on your back, treasure. And I—”

“She’ll be fine,” interrupted Riot, taking my hand and brushing against my side.

“Where’s Wrath?” I asked, looking around the faces of my partners for him. I needed to thank him for saving my ass—and for whatever... *that* was.

“Tied up,” Dice said instantly, shooting me a look that said not to press the subject.

I sighed.

“C’mon, I can’t wait for you to see the dress I picked out for you.” Poison grinned, leading the way into the locker room.

I pushed the thoughts of Wrath and Kallum out of my mind, they could both be dealt with after a little well-earned downtime.

IT WAS like Underworld University was trying to outdo itself. The party was insanely loud and busy, with bodies in every available square inch of space. I was passed around, taking shots and dancing with my partners in a blur of upbeat dance tracks and wandering hands.

It was the time of my life.

When I was alive I'd been so focused on school work and *famiglia* business that I'd hardly had time to really enjoy myself.

To just *be*.

Every night at the clubs came with a security detail and a non-optional curfew. I'd be dragged kicking and screaming out of more Manhattan bars than I was willing to admit.

But now?

Four possessive partners had my back, shoring me up so that I could really let go.

I'd even managed to drink Mouse under the table. She'd already turned in for the night—hiccuughing and stumbling as Wrath led her upstairs after she'd thrown up over his shoes.

I did another round of shots with Riot and Saint, the latter's cheeks rosy with liquor and lips puffy from my biting kisses.

Riot grinned, licking a stripe up my sweaty neck to wash down the tequila as Dice's hands found my ass, his lips meeting my ear as he groped me through the thin material of the skintight dress Poison picked out for me. "Let's go upstairs."

"You good with that?" I asked Riot and Saint—Poison had disappeared to hunt us down some more drinks.

Riot bared her teeth playfully. "But what about me, princess?"

Saint looped an arm around the brunette's shoulders with a chuckle. "Don't you get her like every night?"

"So?" She replied hotly.

"Sooooo," the blond pulled the word out into a drunken, off-pitch song as Dice's hand squeezed my ass again, "you need to learn to share. You guys have fun, we'll have our turn later."

"Our turn?" Riot choked out in a disgusted tone. "Feathers, you're fucking crazy if you think I'm going to let you anywhere near me with—"

I didn't hear the rest of what she said as Dice led me through the crowd, the pair of us giggling like schoolgirls as we made our way across the lobby and into the elevator for a string of wild, desperate kisses as we made it to Dice's floor. He led me to his room with his massive hand encircling mine. The pair of us stepped out of the well-lit hall into the dimness beyond his door.

Dice's dorm was everything I'd expected, his devil-may-care attitude spilling into the state of his living space. On the side designated as his,

clothes littered every available surface, forming haphazard piles like he hadn't been to do laundry since the term started. His bedsheets were twisted, a mess of maroon and cream linens alongside rumpled pillows. Books, papers, and sports gear fought for the rest of the free space on the floor, the carpet all but swallowed to his clutter.

In stark contrast, his roommate's side of the dorm was immaculate, the drawings tacked above the bedside the only personality to be seen.

A warm hand encircled mine, tugging me across the room towards the canopy bed I'd correctly identified as his on the far—extremely untidy—side.

Dice collapsed backwards onto the mattress and I followed him clumsily, tripping on one of his discarded shoes. He laughed loudly, his lips finding mine as I worked through a fit of giggles, straddling his middle.

"I like you like this," he purred, his mouth finding its way sloppily down my cheek and jaw for a nip of his sharp teeth along the tender skin.

"Drunk?" I snorted, grabbing his face in my hands for a firm, licking kiss that had me tasting the bourbon he'd sipped all night.

He pinched my ass hard enough to make me yelp, grinding his erect cock against my core through the fabric of our clothes. "No. In *my* bed. On top of *me*." His lopsided grin was pure sex as I sat up, reaching behind me for the zipper of my dress.

"A little help, handsome?" I teased as I struggled to get it off, blowing a strand of hair from my face.

"Anything for my girl."

Dice sat up, brushing my fingers away and finding the zipper that'd been eluding me with ease. He pulled the cup-like front of my dress down, exposing my bare breasts to him in the faint moonlight drifting through the windows.

I opened my mouth to ask if we should pull the hangings when Dice's talented mouth closed around my nipple, his tongue flicking at the sensitive peak with practised movements. His big hands found my ass, using his grip on my hips to grind my core against his tented pants.

A soft moan wriggled free of my lips and I curled my fingers into his hair. I was already soaked from a night of touching and teasing on the dance floor, and I was done waiting.

"No foreplay—need you—" I whimpered.

He released my breast with a loud pop, flashing another one of those bastardy smiles at me.

My fingers found the hem of his shirt and I pulled it off quickly, taking a far too brief moment to appreciate the hard body that lay beneath. Dice was built—not sculpted the way that Poison was, all hard muscle peeking through fair skin—no, Dice was thicker around the middle, the strong planes of his stomach with a thin layer of padding overtop.

He lifted me off his lap, making quick work of his own pants and underwear while I dropped my dress to the floor in a pool of silk and lace.

“C’mere,” he insisted, reaching for me as I moved to take off my panties.

I peeled them down my thighs, tossing them haphazardly towards where my dress lay as he grabbed my waist, tossing me onto the mattress on my back.

It wasn’t a delicate joining of bodies helped along by an ample amount of liquor and leftover adrenaline from him saving my ass this afternoon; it was messy. My slick pussy lubricated Dice’s cock as he slid it through my folds, precum leaking from the fat tip.

“Let me on top,” I insisted and he obliged, rolling so that I straddled him.

“Anything you want.”

I lined him up with my entrance, bearing down on his cock with a slow slide.

“Fuck, treasure. You’re so tight,” he hissed through his teeth.

Dice was a big guy, the stretch almost overwhelming against my inner walls as I rode him, chasing both of our orgasms. His hips bucked up on my downstrokes, helping him hit deeper at a new angle. One of his hands wrapped around my hip, the other the back of my neck as he pounded into me from below, stealing the breath from my lungs as I clung to him, unable to do anything but go along for the ride.

My head swam with pleasure, my orgasm building quickly.

“Play with yourself for me,” he demanded.

I found my clit, rubbing quick circles as heat built in my core. I moaned and whimpered above him, every nudge of the sensitive pearl of nerves making my pussy clench.

“Won’t—Won’t last long—” he grunted, suddenly scooping me off his lap, leaving me feeling far too empty.

Dice flipped us, moving my body around as easily as a doll as he forced me face down into the mattress. He re-entered me from behind, growling low in the back of his throat, just barely louder than the sound of my flesh meeting his in pounding thrusts that stole the air from my lungs.

“Sorry—can’t—fuck you feel too good—I can’t keep my—glamour—don’t want to—scare you—” His words were punctuated with growls and grunts, my own high whimpering moans loud in my ears.

I came with a fresh wave of slickness between us, thrown over the edge by the idea of what he would look like without his glamour. That the monster under his skin would finally be visible to me, fulfilling the promise he’d made about the *two* appendages that he could use to fill me up.

He hissed as my pussy convulsed around him in my orgasm, his fingers punishing where they landed on my skin.

Dice pulled out suddenly, a hot spurt landing on my ass and back. His hand firmly on the back of my head as I fought to catch my breath. “Please—wait a second—need to get in control. Close your eyes.”

“Di—”

“Please,” he begged, running his other hand soothingly down my side as the mattress dipped beside me. “*Please*. I’ll pull it back on.”

I scowled into his sheets and struggled against him, wriggling free with more difficulty than I would’ve liked. Dice sat on the edge of the bed, a swath of his deep aubergine chest illuminated by the thin strands of moonlight coming for the nearby window.

He froze as I sat up, scooting closer to him on the bed. “Talon—” His voice was half warning, half plea as I ran my palm up his chest, over his pec and to the crook of his neck and shoulder.

I used my grip on him to tug him slightly forward, illuminating his face in the silvery glow.

My breath caught.

Dice’ chiselled face was like a marble bust of some forgotten god, his cheekbones wide alongside a strong straight nose that flattened a bit at the tip. His full lips were parted, slightly puckered on one end by a series of three close-together scars that reached from his mouth to forehead. His injured eye was clouded, the entire thing the shade of the palest lilac. The other, rounded by fear and worry, was the same as when he wore his glamour, though more troubled than I’d ever seen him.

“You’re beautiful,” I breathed, my voice hoarse.

“Please don’t lie to me,” he whispered, his voice shaking. “I know what I look like.”

I rose to my knees, looping my arms around his neck with a grin. “It’s undeniable; you are the hottest guy on campus.”

“Talon—” he warned.

I interrupted his protest with a kiss, his familiar lips slightly fuller than my muscle memory could recall. He groaned into my mouth, his thick arms wrapping around me desperately as I licked into his mouth, the moment his tongue met mine I sucked on it, long and slow.

When we broke apart, we were both panting.

He stared at me for a long moment, his gaze intense where it landed on my skin. “Are you sure?”

I nodded, nipping at his top lip and giving it a gentle sucking kiss as my hand found his groin, my heart stuttering as my fingers slid between not one, but two cocks.

“Oh my god,” I breathed, delirious excitement zipping down my spine. “Lay down.”

“What?” Dice asked, unnerved.

“Lay down, idiot,” I insisted, swatting at his hip.

Slowly, Dice moved to lay on his back.

I explored his thick thighs with my hands, crawling between his parted legs to tease at the crease of his thigh.

Dice squirmed as I looped my hand around the base of one of his two cocks, the pair of them jutting one on top of the other with a slight downward curve. His balls hung below the pair, heavy and covered in a light dusting of black hair that matched the strands on his head. The root of his cocks were surrounded by hair, thinning as it trailed up his stomach to his belly button.

I licked my lips as I stroked up the shaft slowly, watching as the second cock jumped. “You’re amazing,” I breathed.

Dice growled. “Talon, I don’t like being teased.”

“No?” I asked curiously, wrapping my other hand around his neglected cock to stroke them both in tandem. “But it’s so *fun*.”

He groaned, his head falling back against the mattress. “You are an impossible woman.”

I darted forward quickly, wrapping my hands together around his cocks so that the heads touched, my tongue circling around them both.

“Fuck—”

I sucked him down slowly, my cheeks hollowing hardly halfway down with his combined size. He bucked into my mouth making me gag and my eyes water.

“Shit, sorry—”

I hummed, bobbing my head until I gagged again, leaving a slick trail of my saliva as I pulled off him, the strand connecting my mouth to his cocks for a lewd moment.

Dice’s eyes were dark with need, his single pupil blown. He sat up, his hands snapping out to grab my waist and push me under him. His hand disappeared briefly through the curtain into his nightstand. Clattering followed until he returned with a bottle of lube in his hand.

“I can work you up to both, treasure, but it’ll be easier if I can take your ass this time.”

I nodded eagerly. “You’ll have to prep me,”

Dice grinned, putting a healthy squeeze of lubricant onto his fingers and using them to apply it to my ass. “Of course, I’m a *demon* not a *monster*.” He kissed my neck, sucking a mark into the side of my tender flesh as he ground his cocks against me, the lower of the two slipping into my cunt with ease.

I gasped as he filled me, thrusting in shallow strokes of his hips, his second cock dragging against my clit with every move.

A finger teased at the opening of my ass before pushing inside, the pressure making my back arch.

“Oh—fuck!” I hissed, my pussy reacting immediately to the intrusion.

“Good girl,” he ground out, pumping in and out of my ass in time with his slow thrusts into my cunt.

I shivered as he put another finger in my ass, scissoring and stretching the tight ring of muscle with careful movements as I bucked my clit against his second cock.

“Dice!” I moaned and thrashed as he added a third finger, the feeling of impossible fullness building to an impossible height.

Glamoured, Dice’s cock had been huge. I thought that it was that the magic somehow made his two cocks into one, but I realised now, a little dimly, that his glamoured cock was designed to still be at human

proportions. Because the monster that was nudging against my cervix and stretching me to breaking had a partner that was just as big.

I was panting, begging, cursing as Dice opened me, trailing kisses over my face and singing my praises as he prepared me to accommodate him. I'd lost track of the quick, consuming orgasms at this point, my brain hazy with the warring sensations. And then, it was all gone, Dice's fingers and cock leaving my holes empty wanting more. He stroked lube over his lower cock, adding it to my desire before lining himself up with my ass.

"Ready?" he asked raggedly, sucking my earlobe. "It's going to be a tight fit, treasure. You have to tell me if I hurt you."

I nodded, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him to me for a delicate kiss.

He gripped my hips, guiding me onto his cocks with a low snarl. "Talon—"

I screamed, my nails dragging down his back.

It was overwhelming. I was full to the point that I thought I'd break in half. Stretched and stuffed and delirious with the pleasure of feeling him everywhere as I bit into his shoulder.

Dice yelped, his hips bucking in surprise. "Ouch! Am I hurting you?"

"No!" I gasped, squeezing my eyes tightly shut. "Move, idiot!"

He breathed a relieved laugh, a possessive hand finding my throat as he moved in tantalizingly slow strokes.

The pressure on my neck sent me careening into another orgasm that had me strangling Dice's cock. He growled, his pace quickening, fucking me through my pleading for another release until I was so lost to the feeling of him that I didn't know up from down.

His hand was on my throat, squeezing just enough to block my air and make me lightheaded. "Good girl, Talon. Taking these cocks like you were made for them."

"Dice, fuck! Don't stop!"

"Not even if you begged me," he grinned, nipping at my jaw and making me gasp.

His cocks warred inside my ass and cunt for which would make me feel the fullest, moving in tandem to bring me to ruin.

I came with a wet gush between us, stars dancing across my vision as I all but screamed, my body going boneless under Dice's rough grip.

He thrust into me a few more times, the sound of the headboard cracking against the wall in time with his thrusts. I felt the hot, wet splash of his release, his two cocks drawing away and leaving me feeling deliciously empty as his cum dripped from my spent body onto the sheets.

My head was swimming, the aftershocks pricking my skin and making me shiver.

Dice disappeared off the bed for a moment, a derisive snort escaping him as his footsteps disappeared. I was half asleep by the time he returned, the feel of a warm washcloth mopping between my thighs across my tender sex before it found my ass.

“You’ll stay, yeah?” he asked, his hand brushing down my chest and stomach.

The world swayed as I turned.

“Mm, you want me to?” I slurred, my eyes heavy with sleep.

Dice’s hands were gentle as he scooped me up and brought me under the covers with him, draping me over his chest in an intimate cuddle. “More than I should, probably.”

I laughed once, a short sound with no malice. “Shhh, I’m sleeping, idiot.”

“G’night, treasure.”

I wanted to reply but sleep was already overtaking me, dragging me into the dark where I’d wake up and Dice would still feel like my real boyfriend. Not just someone pretending to like me for a bet.

MY BODY ACHED when I woke, my core and thighs screaming in protest as I stretched, my ass grinding against a hard cock at my back.

It was probably morning, maybe even afternoon—not that I could tell through the thick bed curtains closed in a perfect, warm cocoon around us.

The after-effects of too much alcohol ravaged my head, leaving my mouth feeling dry and my eyes stinging. I’d need to feed the hangover some greasy french fries and a sports drink ASAP if I wanted any chance of enjoying the day. Though, as Dice stirred behind me, his strong arm circling my waist tighter as I shifted to try and reach for my phone on the

bedside table, I wondered whether staying in his bed all day wasn't the best option.

"Mm, if you keep rubbing your ass against me like that I'm going to have to do something about it," he murmured, chasing after my body with his own, his hand moving to grope my breast.

I laughed, the sound making me wince. "Oh yeah?"

He hummed, trailing his lips against my shoulder. "We could turn last night's mistakes into today's, if you'd like."

It was like being splashed with ice water, reality ripping away the cozy fantasy I'd built for myself last night.

This wasn't real.

A *mistake* that was an unfortunate side effect of a bet I had no chance of winning.

Even if a tiny part of me wanted it to be real, it wasn't. We were fiction.

I pried his arm off me with some effort. Dice grunted gruffly and rolled away from me.

"Not a morning cuddler?"

"No, I love to cuddle." I looked over my shoulder at the demon as he lounged against the pillows, an adorably sleepy grin on his unglamoured face, the deep, puckered scars visible in the low light. "But not usually with *last night's mistakes*."

I regretted the words as soon as they were out of my mouth.

Dice's expression darkened. "Right. Because this doesn't change anything. It's not like I like you. You were just some easy ass."

I scoffed, slipping through the bed hangings to hunt down my dress. It took some effort, sifting through Dice's dirty clothes, before I found it and pulled it on, not bothering to zip up. I grabbed one of his t-shirts from the floor and threw it on to cover my bare back. I wasn't going far anyway, and I'd be damned if I asked for that asshole's help right now.

"Talon," he growled, the curtains parting as he followed me into the room, catching my wrist in his massive hand. "I don't know why I said that—" he said quickly. "I do—I—"

"Oh go on then," I snarled. "Tell me that you actually care about me like I don't know that it's bullshit, Dice. You know that convincing yourself that we're together won't win you this bet, right?"

"You're impossible!"

“And *you* are dumber than you look if you think I’m going to let you manhandle and lie to me. Now let go of my arm, dickhead. I’m going to sleep off my hangover somewhere else.” My gaze flicked between his eyes, the familiar violet and cloudy lilac, with a painful twinge in my chest.

Dice dropped my arm like I burned him, his hand finding the scars on his cheek.

“Thanks for an incredibly mediocre time,” I snapped, turning to head for the door with tears stinging my eyes.

My panties were fuck knew where and I decided I’d rather go back to my room commando than waste time looking for them. I couldn’t deal with him looking at me like that anymore. Like it was *me* who didn’t want *him*.

Stupid. It was so *stupid*. I knew what this was.

I was halfway across the room before the loud lick of page turning drew my attention to the fastidiously tidy side of Dice’s dorm. Wrath lounged against the headboard, shirtless in a pair of low-slung academy-issued sweatpants, his jade eyes tracking my state of undress.

Our gazes met for a tense moment, his lips tilting into an unkind smirk.

“Topsider,” he greeted, flicking the page of the book in his hands with an elegant finger. “I thought that was your voice shouting to the heavens last night. Am I next? I was the one who solved your problem after all.”

My cheeks burned as I grabbed my phone and shoes, a few fat tears rolling down my cheeks. “Fuck off!”

“Oooh, what a comeback. What, did Dice not have enough stamina—” he mocked as the door slammed behind me, leaving me alone in the hall.

My heart hurt when I pictured Dice’s stricken face, but what did he expect? It wasn’t like we were actually dating. He’d said it himself, I was just some *easy ass* to him.

I clenched my teeth against a sob.

What a fucking idiot!

Last night I’d stupidly thought that something changed between us. Like the reverent way he’d possessed my body was something more than a drunken hookup. It was stupid, wishful thinking. The kind of foolishness that would lose me my insurance policy.

And for what?

You were just some easy ass.

I sniffed, stumbling into the elevator with a quick click of the button for my floor. My phone pinged in my hand and I glanced at the screen as the doors closed smoothly, the carriage descending.

NEW RANK ALERT!

Congratulations! You have achieved a new personal best!

Talon, Rank #7

MY LIPS PARTED IN SURPRISE, tears blurring my vision as I looked at the stupid, impossible notification in my hand.

The game was over. Dice *lost*.

I scrubbed my eyes against my forearm.

That fucking idiot was actually in love with me. He forfeited the game. If he expected a few rank points to make that shitty conversation go away he had another thing coming.

Not only had he fucked up my fail-safe by quitting, he'd managed to hurt my feelings too. And that was going to take more than putting me in The Ten to fix.

WRATH

TWENTY NINE

Dice had fucked up.

The subtle quiver of Talon's lip as she left my room was almost enough to drag me out of my bed and into the hall after her. But I wasn't the right person to make her feel better, and Dice was too focused on his own bruised ego to see the mistake he'd made.

Except, that wasn't the mistake I should've been thinking about. I *should've* been angry that he'd gotten close to her at all and put our plans to escape Hell in jeopardy. Something that Riot had fucked up too.

Both of them were beyond foolish to put their frivolous feelings ahead of our goal. Ahead of everything we'd already *sacrificed*.

Yet here I was, doing no better as I looked over the practice problems I'd given Talon.

I didn't expect her to show up for our tutoring session after our exchange this morning, but I guessed that she understood that no matter what her rank was, failing classes was an instant case for expulsion. She was just desperate enough to need my company. Not the most warming thought.

I smoothed my hand down the front of my shirt, watching her as she struggled her way through the next set of problems. Any indication of the pink-cheeked and teary-eyed girl I'd seen leaving my dorm was gone. Her hair in perfect waves down her back, uniform pristine except for a wrinkle near the collar, likely at the fault of her tie.

My fingers twitched with the desire to smooth it for her.

"I just—I don't get it," she grumbled, blowing out a frustrated breath and laying her head on the table. "Maybe I'm stupid."

“You aren’t stupid,” I reasoned. “You’ve improved a lot.”

She groaned. “Not enough to pass.”

I fought the urge to smile. She was cute when she was desperate.

“Probably enough to pass.”

“I should probably give you this now, if I’m going to flunk out next week.” She sat up and fished a wad of navy fabric out of her bag, offering it to me. “I had to guess on the size.”

I blinked, taking the T-shirt from her hands and smoothing it to see the great white shark screen-printed on the front, its maw opened in a horrifying black hole circled by rows and rows of razor-sharp teeth embedded into pink gums.

A gift. She’d brought *me* a *gift*. And she’d *remembered* what I’d told her.

Surprise sang through me, my heart knocking painfully against my ribs.

I’d never be able to wear something this casual. I didn’t have a single t-shirt in my wardrobe that wasn’t designed to be worn in the gym or on the prey field. Even my fucking pyjamas had *buttons*.

It wasn’t becoming of members of Lucifer’s family to be seen as *common demons*. We had to be more. More polished. More deadly. More respected.

Too much.

She brought her lip between her teeth nervously. “I’m sorry if it’s stupid.”

“It’s not.” I held the slightly oversized top to my front for her approval, fighting the giddy smile threatening my mouth. “What do you think?”

“It looks cool.” She grinned, tucking her hair behind her ear. “It’s a thank you gift—for all the tutoring—and for helping me with Lucky.”

Her easy gratitude made me uncomfortable. Hadn’t I done what I was supposed to?

I remembered the sensation of squashing that cockroach’s eye under my boot with grim satisfaction. No. I hadn’t done what I was supposed to. I’d done what I *wanted* to do.

“I lost a bet,” I deflected as warmth crawled up the back of my neck at her praise.

The warmth in her eyes shuttered. “Right.”

Icy panic crawled through my chest.

Fuck. That was not the right thing to say.

“Let’s go find the reference book,” I said hurriedly, trying to bring back the comfortable atmosphere of a moment ago. “Maybe reviewing it again will help you remember what goes next.”

She nodded stiffly, pushing away from the table and heading for the stacks, her skirt rolled so high that I caught a glimpse of lacy black panty under its hem.

I averted my gaze, breathing in sharply as I put the t-shirt into my bag. I’d been attracted to the topsider from the second I’d seen her. Intelligent, calculating brown eyes with a calculative mind to match. Long, dark hair that I wanted to fist in my hand while she sucked my cock with that smart mouth of hers.

I shook myself out of the familiar fantasy, my cock stirring disobediently in my trousers.

Devil have mercy on me.

After checking that her gift was carefully stowed away, I chased after her, following deep into the library towards the arithmancy section.

When I found her, she was trailing her finger along the spines of books as she looked for the familiar tome, collecting dust as she went.

The desire to pull her hand away was all-encompassing.

I stepped forward to grab it at the same time she did, raising on tiptoe in her sneakers so that her perky ass ground against my cock. Our fingers met on the spine of the book, warm and electrifying.

She gasped as I crushed her to the bookcase, her hands closing around the filthy shelf and disturbing the thick layer of dust.

My heart pounded against my ribs with so much force I was sure she’d be able to feel it. My skin was feverish with desire for this impossible woman.

Desire I had no right to act on.

I should have backed away. Could have, really. But we were alone. No one to see us and make assumptions—And I had her in my grasp.

How was I supposed to let go?

“Wrath—I—”

Her tear-streaked face flashed through my memory and I crowded impossibly closer.

“He’s an idiot,” I rushed out, my voice so low that it was barely louder than the pages turning like whispers. “What Dice said this morning—”

“That’s between us,” she said as my hands slid from the book to her fingers, capturing them in mine briefly before continuing to wander up her arms.

She didn’t stop me, hardly breathing as my chest crowded her back, leaning just enough into my touch that I knew she felt this too. The magnetism that bound us since the first day she arrived here—a stick of dynamite in the middle of the coal mine that was the tenuous grasp I had on my life.

No.

Talon wasn’t the incendiary—the force that ruined everything—she was the canary, the creature that warned that something was very, very wrong.

I needed to stop this, but my hands found her shoulders and then her back, blazing a trail of fire down her spine until followed the curve of her ass. Down, down, over the absurdly short rolled hem of her skirt, the pads of my fingers teasing at the sensitive skin at the back of her thighs.

“What are you doing?” she whispered as my lips brushed her ear, forced forward by the siren call of sunlight that clung to her like perfume.

“I have no fucking idea,” I replied honestly, my voice breathless to the point of pathetic.

She was temptation personified. Smart, sexy, and a little crass. A perfect storm that brought those around her to heel—called to them with kindness and daring.

I wanted her to be *mine*.

But, like we’d already figured out with Riot—it wasn’t going to work.

She was going to graduate from this place and probably become one of the best prey players in the league if her first season was any indicator, and I was getting the fuck out of here. Out from under my father’s thumb. Away from the pressure that my title presented. Into the light where I belonged.

We would only be temporary. A blip in her long Afterlife.

But it didn’t stop me from *wanting*.

I trailed my hands from the back of her thighs to the front, my fingertips teasing at the edge of her panties. Talon shifted, the swell of her

ass pressing against the bulge growing in my trousers and I hissed through my teeth.

“Do you want me to stop?”

If she said so, I would walk away. I would force myself to release her. We would never do this again.

“No,” she whispered raggedly, opening her legs a little further to invite my fingers closer to her core. I hooked a finger into the side of her underwear, pushing it to the side as my lips came in contact with the side of her neck for a slow, seductive *suck*.

She whimpered as my fingers came in contact with her bare pussy, already growing slick with need for me. “Wrath.”

A warning. A plea. *An invitation.*

“Shhh,” I murmured, rolling my thumb over her clit in slow circles. “I have you, princess.”

“Fuck,” she moaned, grinding her ass against my cock as my long middle and pointer fingers toyed with her entrance, slipping in and out in shallow thrusts.

“You’re so wet for me already,” I teased, my voice a husky whisper that I hardly recognised.

“Please,” she gasped as my fingers slid home, crooking to find the spot that made her moans come louder. My other hand found her mouth, covering it to mute the noise.

As much as I wanted to hear her, to revel in the way she keened for me, we couldn’t be discovered.

“Can you be quiet for me?” I murmured into her ear, dragging my teeth along the lobe.

She nodded and I used my hold on her face to turn it towards me, my fingers leaving her mouth to be replaced with my lips.

“Fuck,” I groaned into her mouth, my hands shook where they touched her, begging me to hurry.

But I wouldn’t be rushed, I wanted to savour this moment like it would be the only one we’d ever have.

I sank slowly to my knees on the faded carpet, flipping up Talon’s skirt to reveal her perky ass.

“What are you—” she whispered urgently, the question breaking into a sharp intake of breath as I rolled her panties down to her mid-thigh.

My mouth made contact with her pussy a moment later, her wet heat reminding me of spring, the soft florals of the most vibrant season mixed with the berries of summer. Sweet and tart, ripe for my taking. I sucked on her lips, collecting as much of her taste as I could on my tongue.

Talon shuddered above me, a whimpering moan escaping her fingers.

I spread her open with one hand, lapping at her sweet cunt with my tongue as my fingers rubbed and pinched at her clit with the other.

Above me, Talon was looking over her shoulder to meet my gaze, her eyes wide and her hand clapped over her mouth, muffling the sounds of her pleasure. Her spare hand threaded into the locks of my golden hair, demanding and authoritative as she pushed me deeper into her delicious cunt.

I speared her on my tongue, seeking more of her as her thighs tensed.

This was crossing a line.

How was I supposed to go back to trying to ignore her after I'd had her?

I needed to stop.

I *couldn't* stop.

Talon ground down hard on my face and I grunted, sipping from her like she was the finest liquor in the entirety of the family cellar. She was immaculate, her long lashes fluttering against her cheeks with every whimper and moan. Her dark hair spilled in waves down her back in a silken curtain that I felt the urge to *tug*.

I gave into the desire and was rewarded immediately with a groan that seeped through her fingers, her cloying femininity knotting my stomach with need.

My cock strained against my zipper painfully; the desire I had for her outweighing all good sense as I pulled away just enough to grip her hips and turn her around.

"Don't stop," she pleaded.

"I won't," I swore, hooking my hand under the back of her knee. Her movement was blocked by her panties and I growled, fisting the offending fabric and yanking until it gave way, tearing away from her skin.

She laughed as I handed her the shredded panties and draped her leg over my shoulder. "You look good down there."

A slow smile spread over my features. "How long do you intend to keep a prince on his knees?"

“As long as it takes for you to make me come,” she breathed, her pupils blown with wild lust that I felt as if it were my own.

Without warning, I dove forward and sealed my mouth over her clit to alternate licking and sucking the tight bundle of nerves. My fingers slid home into her tight cunt to scissor inside her, my only thought to fulfill her wish.

I was a demon possessed.

My sole purpose was to bring the woman in my arms to ruin.

Fuck the repercussions.

Talon’s head knocked against the shelves, her breathing picking up as I brought her to the edge.

“Wrath—hnnnh—I’m so—!”

I twisted my fingers at the same time that I grazed my teeth over her clitoral hood and she detonated, shuddering through an orgasm that had her soft thighs locked around either side of my head. I collected every drop of her release I could, using my free hand to keep Talon from folding over top of me.

Voices, far too close to our hiding spot, and the pound of incoming footsteps warned we would soon be discovered.

“No, I swear I heard something,” Gauntlet growled, far too close for my comfort. “There’s some little mousies in here playing.”

Irritation crackled through me as I stood, wiping my face with my hand. I motioned for Talon to be quiet, sucking my fingers for one final taste of her. Watching the way it made her eyes widen and her thighs rub together.

I wanted to share her taste with her lips, to whisper my pleas to escape this filthy library for the safety of my dorm where I could worship at the altar of her body until she begged me to stop.

My jaw worked with fury as the steps drew nearer, sending my fantasies up in smoke.

I straightened my uniform as Gauntlet’s shadow spilled over the carpet in the aisle, warning I was nearly out of time. With a quick run of my hands over my hair to flatten it back into place, I stepped out in front of the giant demon, raising a supercilious eyebrow.

“Can I help you?”

“Oh,” the demon said in surprise, stopping in his tracks. Gauntlet was a giant, even when you compared him to the impossible standards set by

Dice, his closely shaved head gleaming with sweat in the low light of the stacks. “Your Highness,” he greeted gruffly, beady eyes swinging from me to the shelves beyond. “I thought I heard—”

“Well,” I drawled, putting my hands in my pockets. “It’s only me back here as far as I’ve seen, so I’m not sure what you’re hoping to find—” My smile was unkind, sharp. “Unless you fancy being the bottom, a big boy like you? I’m sure you’d be fun to throw around.”

Gauntlet made a face between disgust and outright fear, taking a step back. “I—”

“That’s what I thought. Now piss off, you’re interrupting my studying.”

The giant’s eyes swung between me and the shelves, swallowing as Chips and Spinner came into view behind him.

“Prince,” Spinner called jovially. “Why don’t you join us for dinner? Studying on an empty stomach isn’t going to do you any good.”

If any of them noticed my raging boner, they were at least polite enough not to mention it.

“I—”

“C’mon, you got a girl hiding back here with you?” goaded Gauntlet.

My expression hardened and I laughed, the sound forced to my own ears. “If there was a girl worth fucking do you think I’d go through the trouble of hiding her? Fine, let’s go. I could use a coffee at the very least.”

I flicked a glance at Talon, her expression unreadable. Sometime during the exchange, she’d righted her clothes. A blotchy, angry blush crawled up her chest to her face, her deep brown eyes shrouded in hurt. When I looked away, moving to breeze past the others, it was with lead balling my stomach.

Maybe it’s better this way, I reasoned as the guys started a conversation at my back, following me closely. If she hates me, it’ll be easier to keep away from her.

I grabbed my bag on the way by, the t-shirt she’d brought for me burning a hole at the bottom.

It was my turn to be a fuckup.

TALON

THIRTY

Exams passed by in a blur. I'd barely seen Mouse since studying really started ramping up, though her constant string of text updates made sure I knew she was still a student.

I don't know how she did it; she studied more than almost anyone I knew, rarely returning to our room until long after everyone else was asleep, often sitting up in her bed with her phone as a flashlight as she riffled through her notes.

She made me feel like a slacker.

I was pretty sure I'd done well on all my exams, especially with Saint and Wrath's careful tutoring. Though I hadn't actually seen much of Wrath since our incident in the library.

Fine by me. like I needed another confusing asshole in my life. No matter how hot I thought he was, blowing me off like that?

He could get fucked. And not by me.

I tied the front of my silken emerald wrap dress, twisting the mirror to get a good look at my reflection.

The rest of my roommates had already gone downstairs to join the Parent's Day festivities. Mouse with the intent of finding some juicy information for trade. Riot to meet up with Wrath and his dad, who she stayed with over the breaks. And Poison to find their mom. Given I didn't have anyone to visit, I was taking my time getting ready.

Tomorrow, the demonic students, and any of the humans with close enough friends to ask them to stay, would leave the school for the two week holiday break. I wasn't looking forward to it.

Sure it would be nice to spend a couple weeks with Saint—but he'd been majorly weird since exams ended a couple days ago. Cagey. Like he didn't really want to hang out but had nothing better to do.

Everything was so fucking complicated lately.

I'd already promised Poison that I'd introduce myself to their mom and I had to admit I was a little excited to see what kind of person she was. I knew she was a shapeshifter like Poison, but beyond that none of my friends really talked about their parents.

My phone rang on the bed as I strapped on my heels and I picked it up, my brow rising at Mouse's contact flashing on the screen.

"Hello?" I called, perching on the edge of the mattress.

"Talon!" her voice came through the receiver in a panicked whisper. "You need to look at the files I just sent you—I don't know how it's possible—but I think someone tampered with your grades."

My blood turned to ice in my veins. "*What?*" I shrieked, pulling the receiver from my ear and putting my friend on speakerphone.

"I traded a bit of gossip to get a look at my grades—I thought I'd look at yours too to surprise you and give you the good news early."

My fingers shook as I opened the file she sent, my eyes scanning the page.

It didn't make any sense.

I'd failed everything except gym.

Everything.

"What the fuck," I hissed.

When half the arithmancy exam was made up of the questions Wrath gave me to practice on... It was impossible. And yet here it was, written in black and white.

It didn't matter what your class rank was, failing grades were reason enough to be expelled.

I ran my hand over the braided crown that Poison helped me with this morning, staring at the screen in disbelief.

"They haven't been posted yet," Mouse said urgently. "So maybe you can—"

"Maybe I can what?" I snapped. "Beg for forgiveness?"

"Girl, I don't know," she sighed through the receiver.

"There has to be something I can do. There is no way that these are my test scores."

My phone beeped with an incoming text, Saint's name bannered across the top of my phone to warn that he would be at my door soon.

"I gotta go—Mouse—thanks—for telling me I mean—"

"We'll figure this out," she swore and disconnected the line.

I hopped up from the bed to pace, my mind turning over and over.

Somebody fucked with my grades.

Frenchie? No, she wasn't smart enough to do it.

The answer hit me like a truck, splintering my bones and making me feel sick.

"Kallum," I hissed aloud, my fists clenching so hard around my phone that it was a wonder it didn't break.

A knock came at the door and I darted to open it, finding Saint in a smart black suit, his icy blond head tilted to the side. "You look—"

"Tell me I'm hot later, we have a problem," I interrupted.

If I was going to fix this, I'd need a plan. And fast.

SAINT CAUGHT ON QUICKLY, running through our options to fix my grades. Or rather, *option*, we decided on the plan as we walked to the administration building.

It was massively risky, but I was already getting expelled, so it's not like my situation could get any worse.

We skipped the hallway that led to the Headmistress' office for the giant double doors that led to the ballroom, filled to bursting with students and their parents.

Nerves prickled at my skin as I looked up at Saint. He met my nervous expression with a steady grin, kissing my cheek.

"Don't worry, angel, it'll work out."

"I hope so," I muttered, scanning the crowd for Poison. I had some promises to keep before Pan took to the podium for her address. Which meant I needed to work the room quickly and efficiently.

My eyes caught on their slightly shaggy hair, and the woman with her hands on their face, turning it this way and that to get a better look. I huffed a laugh, grabbing Saint's hand and towing him towards the pair.

His weird behaviour this week aside, Saint was really coming through for me right now. That put him right back in my good books.

Poison's mom was gorgeous. She had dark blue eyes that matched her child's, her hair cut into a severe black bob that contrasted beautifully with the soft curves of her heart-shaped face.

My partner peeled her hands away, offering me an embarrassed smile over the woman's head. "Mama," they said urgently, motioning to me as we approached. "This is Talon and Saint."

"I can't tell you how excited I am to meet you!" she trilled, throwing her arms around me for a rough squeeze—completely ignoring Saint. "Alba has told me everything about you of course—I'm so sorry to hear about your death." She didn't look sorry, not with the giant grin pasted to her face, her cheeks straining to contain her excitement as she gripped my hands in hers.

"You have to call me Poison at school," they admonished fondly.

"Terrible name," she whined. "I gave you a nice name. You should use it."

They sighed. "It's to prepare us for—"

"To prepare you for the topside, yeah, yeah—" she spoke over them, gripping my shoulders as she held me an arm's length away. "You'll be staying with us for the winter break, right?"

"Mama!" Poison groaned, rubbing their face over their hands, the tips of their ears pink. "I haven't gotten the chance to talk to her about it yet —"

"Well it's decided then." She gave me another fond squeeze before releasing me and I laughed softly.

This woman was a hurricane in a bite-sized package. She almost reminded me of Penny.

"What is?"

"You'll stay with us over the break," Poison said hopefully, their arm snaking around my waist and drawing me to their side. "If you'd like to, that is."

I bit my lip at the embarrassed look on their face, my eyes swinging between the pair of shapeshifters and then over to Saint.

He shrugged, an amused expression on his usually serious face.

"I wouldn't want to put you out, um—sorry—I didn't catch your name."

“It’s Enil.” She grinned, pushing at her own cheeks. “You are just so precious! Look at her hair, Alba! It’s so dark and shiny!”

Poison and I shared a look, biting down on a matching pair of smiles when Wrath joined us, Enil’s attention fracturing as she wound him into a bone-crushing hug.

“There you are! S—”

“Wrath,” he corrected quickly, dislodging himself from Enil’s hold. “I’ve come to collect Talon and Saint. My father would like to have a word.”

She looked a bit put out, her arms folding. “Can’t he wait? I was just getting to know Al—”

“Poison, Mama,” they insisted tensely.

“Oh, for Eve’s sake! *Poison*, then! Poison’s girlfriend.”

I grabbed her hands, giving them a gentle squeeze. Enil was a force, her warmth and excitement contagious if not a little overbearing. “I’ll sit with you during dinner. We can make plans for the break?”

“Really?” Poison gasped, a bright smile flashing across their features.

I nodded once and they leaned forward, grabbing my face for an excited—and way too long for being in front of their mom—kiss. When they released me, Enil gave me another hug before turning to her child and hooking her arm through theirs. “Show me your room, I want to make sure you’ve been making your bed.”

Poison groaned, their weak protests fading away as they left Wrath and me in the ballroom, Saint’s protective presence at my back.

I looked up at the golden-haired prince, the memory of the last time we were together wheedling its way to the surface and drawing colour to my cheeks. I hadn’t seen much of Wrath since the library—whether by his design or mine. But now that I was seeing him... Yeah my feelings were hurt.

“Shall we?” he asked, offering me his arm.

“I’m shocked that a girl who *isn’t worth fucking* is important enough to meet *Lucifer*.” I snapped, biting the inside of my cheek to stop the surprising tears that threatened the back of my eyes.

“What?” Saint snapped at the same time Wrath pleaded, “Talon.”

But whatever conversation we were going to have about the topic—and the rest of the biting remarks on the tip of my tongue—died the second that a tall, impossibly well-dressed man in a suit joined our group.

“I came to see what was taking you so long,” he sneered at Wrath, his voice syrupy and languid.

Wrath cleared his throat. “Sir, this is Talon and Saint.”

So this was *Lucifer*.

I pursed my lips.

A few months ago if you’d told me I’d come face to face with the literal devil and I’d feel more pissed off than terrified, I would have laughed in your face.

1. Because I would’ve laughed and told you that Hell was made up.
2. Because if Hell was real, I’d absolutely shit myself to meet Satan himself.

But I wasn’t afraid now, Lucifer had already made a big mistake in my books.

Sure, I was pissed off at Wrath right now, but he’d had my back with Kallum and helped me with my studies when no one else would; he was my *friend*. Fuck this guy if he thought he was going to be a dickhead to him in front of me.

Sweat pooled at my lower back and my hands shook enough that I clasped them behind me.

Okay, yeah, I’m a little fucking scared.

Lucifer’s golden eyes studied the pair of us as a wide, slow smile spread over his features. “Olivia. What a pleasure to finally meet you. My son speaks highly of you.”

His hair was dark, slicked back in gentle waves away from his face. A carefully trimmed beard and moustache lined his strong jaw, his straight white teeth flashing in the lights. His suit was fitted, a dark red with a pattern in a mix of black and silver that was so subtle it was hard to make out covering his thin, wiry frame.

He reminded me of those greasy politicians that Nonna always complained about. Men with more money than sense. More power than honour.

Wrath shifted closer to me, his eyes swinging between the pair of us. I’d never seen him look so... scared.

“And the birdy,” the King of Demons teased.

Saint's hand found my base of my spine, warm and assuring as his lip curled with disgust.

"Don't look so sour. I was just like you once."

Saint opened his mouth to speak, but I cut over him at the squeeze of Wrath's hand on my arm.

"How do you know my name?" I asked, thanking my lucky stars that my voice didn't shake.

"You are one of my subjects. Besides, it's only natural to be a little curious. A transfer student that's managed to work her way up to the top ten in the class? That hasn't happened in millennia," the demon reasoned, with a wave of his hand like it meant little. "Wrath tells me that you're on the prey team."

"We both are," Saint confirmed.

The longer I looked at Lucifer, the sicker I felt. There was something very, very wrong with this man. His entire aura screamed of danger and malice. The way his eyes followed my every movement like he was studying me down to the breaths I took. A predator with a rabbit in its maw.

"It's really no big deal," Wrath murmured.

"I used to play when I was at school too," Lucifer said fondly, rubbing his chin. "I took an associates degree to see what it was like."

"What was your major?" I asked dryly.

"Torture," he replied cheerfully. "How are you finding the school? I know it can be... difficult for transfer students to adapt."

I shrugged, feigning a confidence I didn't feel. "Better than paying the piper, I guess."

Lucifer's expression didn't change, but the hairs on the back of my neck started to stand on end. "Marvellous. You forgot to mention that she was *funny*."

None of us were laughing as Lucifer stared me down. Especially Wrath, who had paled so much that he looked green, his expression tight and anxious.

"Perhaps Talon and Saint could go dance, sir." He suggested, tilting his head towards the dance floor. "It's their first ball in Hell, afterall."

As if he realised we had an audience, Lucifer shook himself, that greasy grin of his spreading across his face again as he clapped his hands together.

“Oh! Of course! I shouldn’t keep you, there will be time for us to talk later. Enjoy the ball.”

Wrath let go of my arm, all but shoving me into Saint as he stepped towards his father. “Let’s go find Riot. I’m sure she’s around here somewhere.”

Saint tugged me backwards through the crowd until we reached the dance floor, the pair of us falling into an clumsy rhythm with the music from the band. I could barely feel my toes, my heart pounding so hard that I could hear it in my ears.

“What the fuck was that?” I hissed to the angel.

He swallowed hard. “Nothing good.”

TALON

THIRTY ONE

Saint and I danced for a while, with him seeming content to leave me to my scattered thoughts when Dice's fingers trailed down my arm, his expression cautious. We hadn't seen each other much this week. Mostly because I was actively avoiding him.

The bet was over anyway, had been since the moment I received the notification with my new rank.

But me and Saint's plan, though a little risky, was just stupid enough that it might work.

I didn't have time for a giant, brooding demon with an inferiority complex right now. Not when Headmistress Pan was due to start her address at any minute.

Especially not with whatever was going on with Wrath's freakshow of a dad.

But, despite the way my ego still stung from his rejection—I couldn't bring myself to walk away from him.

I had a real weakness for idiots.

"Can we talk?" he asked quietly, running a hand over his hair.

I looked at Saint who shrugged, his cool blue eyes tight with anxiety. "I'm sure you could spare him one dance, angel."

I sighed, unwinding my arms from Saint's neck and letting Dice take my hand, pulling me to his body fluidly. "One song, then you're giving me back to my date," I insisted and Dice nodded.

Saint pressed a quick kiss to my cheek. "I'll go get you a drink," he said with a purposeful look towards the refreshment table. Beside it, the

double doors to the administration offices stood wide, tempting in the cool air from the open windows in the hall.

I nodded, my smile brittle as I looked up at Dice. He was glamoured, his hair pulled into a cute knot at the top of his head that showed off the closely shaved sides. His fine, plum suit made his eyes pop—but I found myself missing his real face.

He slid his hand to my waist, the other still clasping my hand as he walked us through a stiff waltz that made me long for the way we danced at the last victory party.

“Wrath said you met his dad.”

“Is that really what you want to talk about?” I asked, a twinge of disappointment only serving to further sour my mood.

“No,” he said, his jaw working. “But I’m not good at this shit, Tal, so I’m trying to work my way up to it.”

“Just spit it out.”

“I’m sorry, okay?” He leaned his chin on the top of my head, his massive hand cupping the back of my neck. “I shouldn’t have said—you aren’t just a bet to me.”

I sighed, circling my arms around his middle. “I got the payout after we fought.”

“I know. I fucked up, Talon. I—I’ll give you every rank point I’ve got if that’s what it takes to make you believe me. We can play Rock Paper Scissors. I’ll only use scissors, I swear. It’s—I—”

“I don’t want your points Dice, I’m good.”

“How do I fix this?” he asked, his hands coming to grip my shoulders and holding me away from him. “I don’t want to lose—I—”

“Kallum fucked with my grades. I’m going to be expelled tomorrow when the semester ends.”

“What?!” he roared, making the other dancers turn their heads to look at us. “Who the fuck is Kallum?”

I threw my arms around his neck, turning him in slow circles, my voice low. “I mean Lucky. Fuck, would you keep your voice down?”

“You have to—Eve’s soggy left tit, Talon! They’ll fucking expell you!”

“Eve’s what?” I snorted, smiling a little.

“Does Riot know? What about Wrath? How can we fix this? What do you need me to—”

“Dice, stop.” I insisted. “Just... answer me something, will you?”

“Talon, you’re being crazy; how the fuck is she supposed to feel when you are gone—”

“Dice!” I snapped, cutting him off. “I don’t care right now. And you shouldn’t either. Fuck how Riot’s going to feel. How will *you* feel?”

“I—” His jaw worked, his violet eyes looking out into the crowd of dancers around us. “What’s it matter? It’s not like you feel the same.”

“*What?*” I asked, affronted. “What gave you that stupid idea?”

“You said as much—plus you’ve—I mean you’ve seen me now, right?” He swallowed hard, looking over the top of my head.

I grabbed Dice’s tie, jerking him down to my eye level. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Tal—” He spluttered.

I crushed my lips to his in a snarling, biting kiss. “You are so *stupid!*”

He returned in kind, grabbing my waist and pulling me close. “I know.”

“Dice, you fucking idiot. You absolute dumbass. You are the hottest, most ridiculous—”

“But—”

“No, shut up! Don’t you ever listen to anything anyone else says to you? You’re *gorgeous*. With or without the glamour. I do not care for one second that your face is scarred up, in fact, I actually think it’s kind of hot —”

“Talon.”

“You have this whole dark and dangerous vibe going on which I’m sure it’s easy to imagine I’m into—”

“Talon.”

“Which I would have told you the other day if you didn’t decide to be a massive fuck face.”

Dice stared at me for a long moment, so still I would’ve thought he’d turned to stone if it wasn’t for the panting, wild uptick of his breathing.

“The bet is over, Talon,” he whispered urgently.

“I know that.”

“This is real?”

“For me, it is. Is it real for you?”

Nerves skittered through my chest, reminding me that only a week ago he’d rejected me in his dorm.

“Yes,” he cradled my face in his hands. “It’s been real for me the whole time.”

I blinked. “The whole time?”

“I only made that bet with you so that you’d give me the time of day.”

“Dice—” I laughed once, disbelieving. “You are such an *idiot*.”

“I know, treasure. But I’m *your* idiot.”

The headmistress took the podium at the front of the room, the lights dimming near darkness as she tapped the microphone. Which meant the clock was officially ticking on my plan to keep my rank.

The rest of this conversation would have to wait, the margin of time I had to get in and out of Headmistress Pan’s office already paper thin.

“Yeah, you are.” I grinned, letting him collect me into his arms for a crushing hug. “Dice, listen, I hate to do this but—I gotta go.”

“C’mon, surely feathers can wait a few more—”

I lowered my voice, speaking directly against his lips. “I need to break into Pan’s office to change my grades so I don’t get fucking expelled.”

He blinked. “You need backup then.”

“I kind of... already have it?”

“Feathers.” Dice laughed. “Who’d think he’d be such a rule breaker.”

“Seriously.” I grinned. “But we can pick this up later?”

The dimple in the side of his cheek popped as he grinned. “Does this mean I get to call dibs tonight?”

“Only if we stay in your room, I’m going to prove that asshole roommate of yours wrong.”

He brightened impossibly more. “Good, I want to rub his face in it. Miserable asshole.”

I kissed his cheek and slipped from his grip, heading off to meet Saint at the refreshments table with the Headmistress’ voice at my back.

“You’re cutting it close,” Saint grouched as I passed by, pausing just long enough to make sure I wouldn’t be missed.

We only had one shot at this, which meant that I’d better have a fucking horseshoe up my ass tonight. I’d need to be quick with the door’s lock.

Saint followed shortly after, closing the door to the auditorium and muting Pan’s simpering voice.

We hurried down the hall, my heartbeat thrumming in my ears.

If we were caught we’d both be expelled, or worse.

If we *didn't* pull this off, I was a goner.

Do or die. Even higher stakes than I was used to. At least when I was alive I kinda thought I'd go to Heaven if there was one.

"Listen—Talon, I need to tell you something—" Saint started as I pulled the bobby pins from my hair.

"Whatever it is, can it wait?" I asked, jamming the pin into the lock.

Saint grabbed my wrist, turning me to look at his sweaty face.

"Kallum switched your test scores with mine. He cashed in his favour from our bet at the beginning of term and told me to purposefully fail my exams."

"How did you—" I gasped.

I'd never told anyone Kallum's real name. Not until Dice just minutes ago.

"That doesn't matter, what matters is I can't let you take the fall for this if we get caught. Go back to the party, let me fix this for you."

"Why would you do that?" I snapped, my voice raising. "I thought we were—I thought you—"

"I'm so sorry," he rushed out, crowding me against the door. "I thought he just wanted to get *me* expelled. I didn't realise he was going to use my poor grades to hurt you."

"What bet at the beginning of term?" I asked, my temper rising.

"I bet Kallum before the first prey match that you'd win. If he lost he'd have to leave you alone—"

"Saint, what the fuck are you saying right now? You bet him to stay away from me? He fucking bashed my head in!" My voice shook with anger as I looked up at the angel, bitter disappointment settling into my bones.

"Yeah," the blond spat miserably. "He cheated."

"How could you do that?" I snapped. "Why would you do that?"

"I—I thought it was the right thing to do. I wanted to keep you safe. Please, Talon, let me make this right for you, go enjoy the ball and let me deal with this." I was pressed with my back against the door, my blood pounding so hard in my ears it gave me a headache as his admission really sank in.

He lied to me. He'd sabotaged me. *He'd helped Kallum.*

Risked my life *and Riot's* because he didn't trust me to take care of myself.

It was like I was looking at a stranger.

Two things happened in quick succession. I lashed out, slapping Saint hard enough across the face that his head whipped to the side, and the door I was leaning against opened, making me fall backwards through it and against a hard chest that swayed unsteadily.

I jerked away, grabbing onto Saint's arms.

He'd skipped ashen and gone grey, his mouth slack as he stared at whoever opened the door.

Lucifer? My brain supplied wildly, panic clawing up my chest and freezing my anger.

"You good there, buddy?" a familiar, cool growl asked, his New Jersey accent all but stamped out from years of private school in the city.

My stomach guttered, bile rising in the back of my throat as Saint tried to stop me from turning—like he was trying to save me from the cruel reality of our situation.

Despite his attempt to shield me, I turned. Wes Ricci, my older brother and previous centre of my universe, met my eyes with his.

My throat closed and the room tilted on its axis, threatening to pull me to the floor.

Wes wore his old motorcycle jacket, blood clinging to the front of the white t-shirt underneath. His boots were scuffed and the knees of his jeans ripped—an outfit that I knew meant Wes had been on a job.

"Olivia?" he hissed, reaching for me in disbelief. "What the fuck is going on?"

My mouth worked soundlessly as my brother's hands gripped my shoulders, pulling me to him for a hug that soaked his blood through the front of my emerald dress.

When I finally found my voice, it came out ragged, warped by a sudden bout of sobs. "Wes, what the fuck happened to you?"

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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(I mean, allegedly, it's a sequel.)

Catch you on the flip!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bex is a cat-mom of three, wife and spicy romance enthusiast living in Edmonton, AB. You can usually find her curled up on the sofa surrounded by a hundred pillows and reading on her kindle (or, y'know, writing.) Becoming her best friend is easy! You just need an undying love of all things sweet and be cool with watching the same five movies on repeat.

